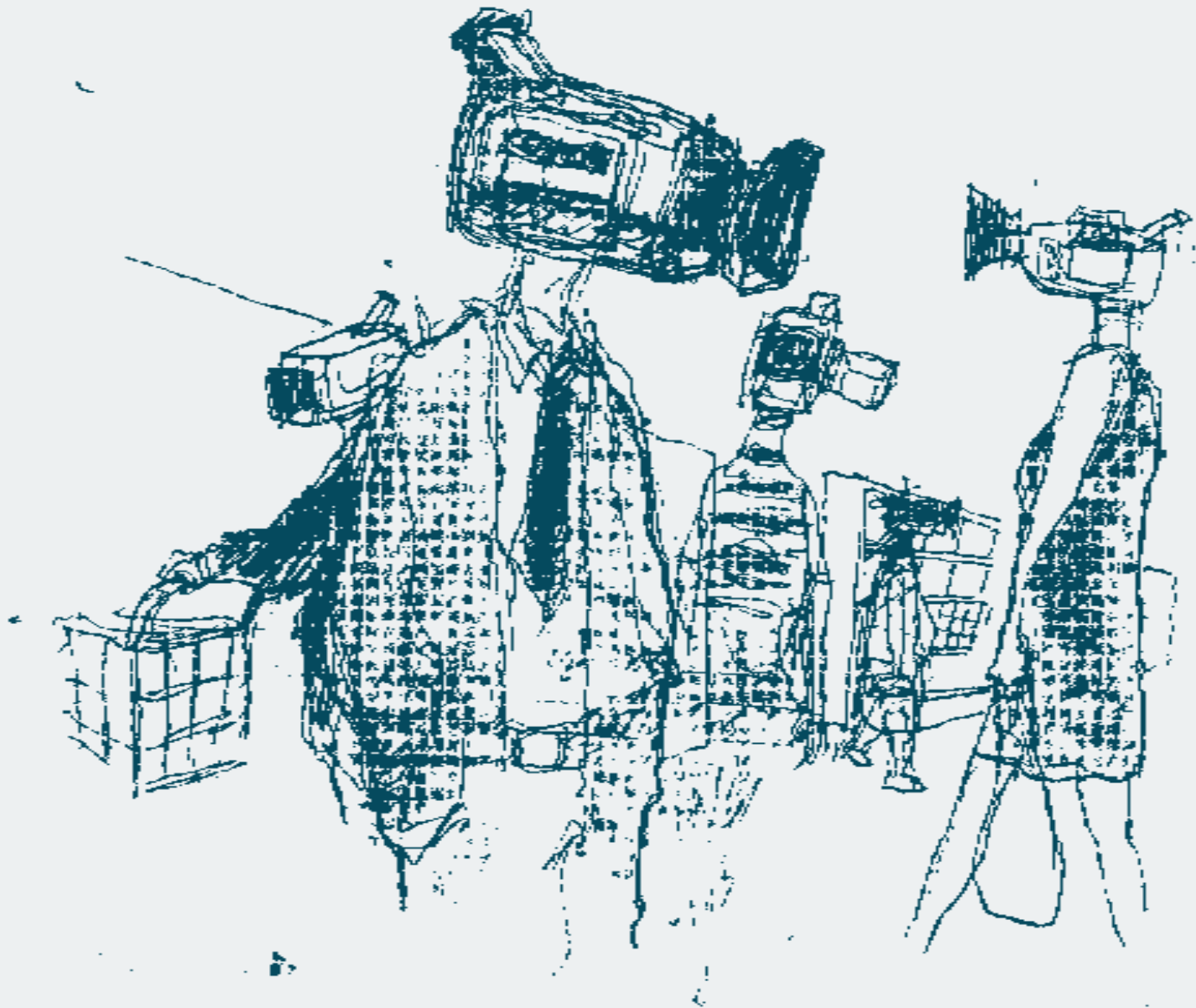


REAL TIME, REAL LIVES, ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

... GETTING TO KNOW USERS IN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR EVERYDAY LIFE

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The pervasiveness of digital products and services has given birth to a new 'tribe' of consumers empowered by immediate access to product information. Their ability to make informed choices about a wide range of products and services is harnessed to an ever-advancing pace of technological change that has produced a fundamental shift in the balance of power between consumers and suppliers.

In the digital arena this is coupled with compressed project cycles and increasing demands from design teams for informative and contextualised user research.

There is a growing need for innovative research methodologies that can keep pace with understanding informed users. Ethnographic research tools are increasingly being used and explored in conjunction with other qualitative and quantitative tools, as part of a wider research process to understand users and inform project teams about the everyday life experiences of users. Ethnographic user research represents an acute shift in the world of re-

search – moving the focus away from the 'market' to 'users,' where the emphasis is on observing life as users experience it rather than relying on their recollection of experiences.

Users will only use and revisit a site or digital service if it meets their needs and is both useful and desirable. Consultancies creating products and services in the digital domain need research tools which allow the project teams to understand users to create positive user experiences that resonate with users.

Without a deep, holistic and contextualised understanding of users' needs and motivations, grounded in their everyday experiences, it is difficult for project teams to create digital products and services which end users will find useful and desirable. Today's dissatisfied consumer can effortlessly switch to another digital product or service.

ETHNOGRAPHY A NEW WAY OF SEEING

The roots of ethnography are found in the academic fields of

social and cultural anthropology. Traditional ethnographic fieldwork is longitudinal, with ethnographers spending months or years in the field.

Ethnographic user research differs in its approach to researching 'users' in a number of important respects from traditional and academically orientated ethnographic research. Time spent in the field is measured in half days, days, and weeks rather than months or years. A team-based approach is employed as opposed to the traditional ethnographer who usually works in relative isolation.

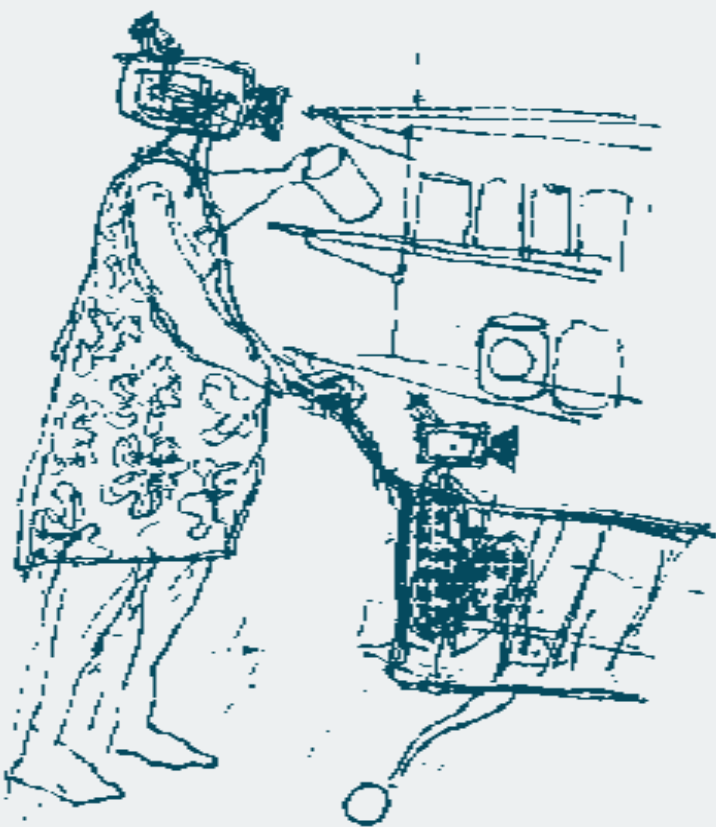
Culture and society remain the central focus of ethnographic user research- interpreting and framing patterns of usage, behaviour, routines, rituals, decision-making processes and identifying the anticipated and unanticipated needs of users.

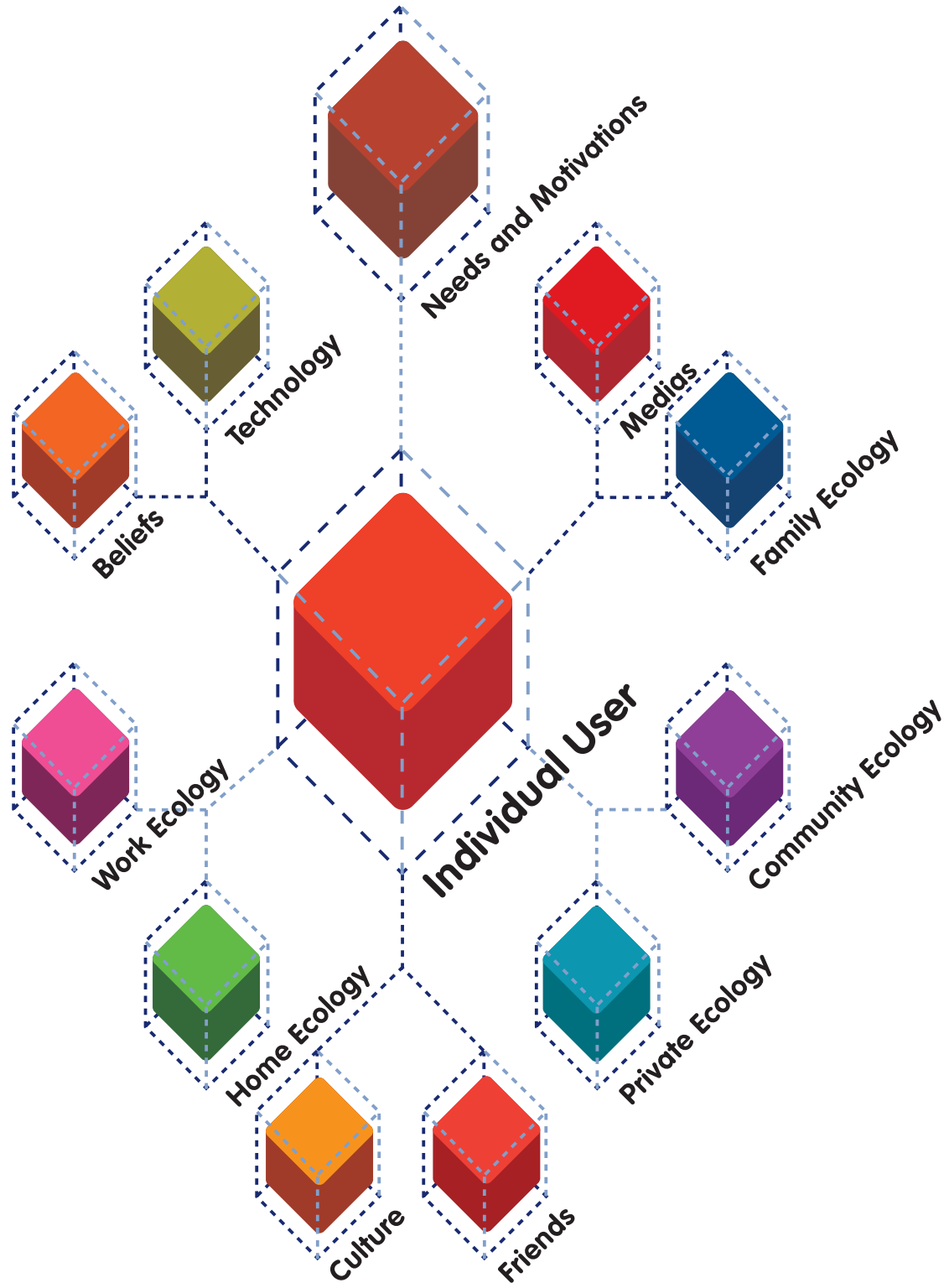
In turn, ethnographic user research differs from traditional market research in several crucial areas. Ethnographic user researchers continually operate where users live, work and play, rather than bringing users into controlled en-

vironments. This increases the trust between researchers and users allowing them to build 'deep' and insightful relationships, often leading to the revelation of personal information which may not have surfaced in the more traditional focus groups or street surveys settings. Ethnography can offer a high degree of transparency to both clients and project teams by creating a visual record of users and which is used to inform clients and project teams about the realities of users' everyday life experiences. Including the project team in the planning, and particularly in the analysis of the fieldwork, helps to create new and emphatic insights.

INTERLINKED USER ECOLOGIES – IDENTIFYING NEEDS AND MOTIVATIONS: NOTHING EXISTS IN A VACUUM

Ethnography adopts a holistic approach by focussing on the whole, rather than individual aspects, of users' lives – identifying needs and motivations allowing an informed product and service offering to be created.





TOOLS

A number of ethnographic user research tools can be utilised in conjunction with quantitative and other qualitative tools in a project to understand users.

* **Video Ethnography** – handheld digital video cameras are used to record users in their everyday environments. ‘Guerilla footage’ is shot while users shop, work, rest and play.

* **Observation and Participant Observation** – ethnographers can observe and participate in users’ lives, for example, when they are out shopping or preparing a meal.

* **Contextual Depth Interviews** – interviews/conversations with users whilst at work or home.

* **Informal Groups** – users join in discussions in the setting of their own environments rather than viewing facilities.

* **Ethnographic Mapping** – identifying clusters of technologies and the organisation of the different spheres of space within the home/office environments. Ethnographic mapping identifies artefacts of the office/home/social ‘technoscapes’, enabling researchers to identify how users have customised products and services for their own use, for example, adding their own notes to instruction manuals.

* **Diary and Disposable Camera Studies** – users are handed cameras and diaries to record events or occasions creating longitudinal pictures of their lives. The results can form the basis for contextual depth interviews.

* **Pager Studies** – users are handed pagers and are contacted a number of times during the day to discover relationships between the time of day, mood, and patterns of human behaviour between different user groups.

* **Artefact/Content Analysis** – users are often given cameras to record printed information or artefacts which they interact with on a day-to-day basis.

* **Ethno-history** – conducting an analysis within a historical framework. The object is to consider a user’s life through time so that continuities and changes in technology usage patterns, family organisations, demographic and other features can be plotted in time against shifting economic, social, technological or cultural environments.

OUT IN THE FIELD

The places where users work, play and live become the ethnographers’ sites of investigation. When working, for example, on a portal focusing on online grocery shopping researchers interact with potential users on a number of uniquely interlinked levels using a number of ethnographic, qualitative and quantitative tools.

Users are observed through their day and into the evening: as they search through their cupboards, fridges and freezers to note the groceries required for the following week, when compiling their shopping lists, asking individual family members what they want, when they put the children in the car, when they arrive at the grocery store, fill their shopping trolley and proceed to the point of purchase, when they drive home and unpack their purchases before putting the children to bed and

then perhaps checking their finances both on and offline. At any point in the day the researcher could be there filming or taking photographs and observing in minute detail their behaviour, verbal and non-verbal expressions and participating in their lives.

Objectives could include identifying influences, relationships, patterns of behaviour and interactions between users and their environments. Anything and everything will, depending upon the objectives of the project, be considered including the influence children have over parental purchasing behaviour, the relationship between the price, brand and purchasing choice, the contact with individual brands, the interaction between shoppers, how people navigate their way around stores, the use of store assistants, the use of digital (mobile, web and future TV) and ‘traditional’ tech-

nologies. Ethnography codifies the processes users go through to complete a task and helps to build user segmentation models, persona development, user scenarios and models of user experience.

Whilst interacting with users and intruding into their own environments there is an initial period where the researcher has to work to develop a deep notion and bond of trust with users. Failing to develop this relationship can call into question the value of the research. Experience has indicated that users, especially children, in the initial stages of research can ‘act’ and ‘play up’ to the researcher, though this quickly wears off and the researcher penetrates into the users’ ‘backstage’.

THE FUTURE

Without fully understanding the complex offline and online worlds of users it becomes increasingly

difficult to design useful and desirable products and services in the digital world, which also meet the business objectives of the client. Ethnographic user research is part of a wider process that permits project teams to distinguish between what users say they do and what they really do in their everyday lives. It uncovers unarticulated needs while identifying, unlocking and adding development value to a project.

The digital world effortlessly transgresses geo-political and socio-cultural borders. The next phase in the evolution of ethnographic user research will be to gain cross-cultural understanding of users in international market places. Ethnographic user research will be used to identify market opportunities for the development and placement of products and services throughout the world.

SUGGESTED READING

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