ICS 132: Organizational Information Systems

Analysing Social Settings - I

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where are we?

- IS success or failure not just technical matter
  - IS need to support organisational functions
  - IS need to "fit" with organisational work
- organisations are complex
  - many different aspects (simultaneously!)
  - different models and metaphors
  - different aspects of organisational work
- now, the focus is on *finding out*
  - how do we go about understanding organisations and the work that goes on in them?

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scruffy and neat

- neat
  - ordered and orderly
  - well-defined
- scruffy
  - different in each case
  - resistant to reductionism
- a question of methods
  - we have methods for the neat
  - we need methods for the scruffy

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ways of finding out

- industry analysis
- published corporate information
- organisational procedure manuals
- customer reports
- surveys and questionnaires

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ways of finding out

- industry analysis
- published corporate information
- organisational procedure manuals
- customer reports
- surveys and questionnaires
- *going and looking!*

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ethnography

- anthropology
  - well-established ways of going somewhere unfamiliar and uncovering what's going on
- ethnography
  - "ethno" (of a people) + "graphy" (writing)
  - from *what people do* to *what they experience*
  - tradition of close and long-term observation

qualitative studies

- quantitative
  - from "quantity"
  - measurement and statistics
    - how many times do things occur?
    - how quickly?
- qualitative
  - from "quality"
  - what sort of thing happens?
- when to use each?
  - quantitative valuable when you know what to ask
  - qualitative valuable to find out what the questions are

bronislaw malinowski

the Chicago School

- the Chicago School of Sociology
  - sociological studies in the 1930s and on
    - originally in Chicago, but the style spread (as people did)
  - applying ethnographic techniques to American cities
    - especially, to subcultures: hobos, alcoholics, drug users, jazz musicians, but also medical students, funeral directors, the police...
      - not just what they do, but how they do it, and what they experience in the doing

doing ethnography

When I was a young student in London I thought I should get a few tips from experienced fieldworkers before setting out for central Africa. I first sought advice from Westermarck. All I got from him was "don't converse with an informant for more than twenty minutes because if you aren't bored by that time he will be." Very good advice even if somewhat inadequate. I sought instruction from Haddon, a man foremost in field research. He told me it was really quite simple; one should always behave like a gentleman. Also very good advice. My teacher Seligman told me to take ten grains of quinine every night and to keep off the women. The famous Egyptologist, Sir Flinders Petrie, just told me not to bother about drinking dirty water as one soon became immune to it. Finally I asked Malinowski and was told not to be a bloody fool.

-- E.E. Evans-Pritchard

doing ethnography

- Why did the Loflands write this book?

- Why are we reading it?

doing ethnography

- major issue is one of *attitude*
  - uncovering the "member's point of view"
- a combination of
  - watching
  - participating
  - asking
  - *listening*
- why participate?
  - getting a better insight (and asking better questions)
  - fostering trust
  - levels of participation

gathering data

- it's amazing what can observe by watching…
- you have to see it to believe it
  - what people tell you and what actually happens are two different things
  - what actually happens is often much more complex and surprising that you'd imagine
- basic techniques
  - participant observation
  - interviewing

focusing data

- remember why you're there
  - don't "go native"
  - whose agent are you in this setting?
- key tasks
  - finding the units, aspects and topics
  - creating a formal understanding
  - relating it to the topics at hand
    - generally, IS design and the relationship to work

analyzing data

- this is the payoff -- if you do it right
- here, analysis is *synthetic*
  - emerges from the interaction of the data and your efforts to focus it
  - an inevitable tension
    - staying faithful to the facts
    - abstracting key ideas
  - what's the "value-added" from your analysis?

starting where you are

- a lot of this is aimed at budding sociologists
  - that's not what we're concerned with here
- more important -- *understand* where you are
  - what points of view do you bring?
  - technical biases
  - you may be uniquely positioned
    - getting to see a bigger picture than most
  - important to maintain distance

evaluating data sites

- again, this is slightly different for us
  - field sites are customers or assignments
- but, still some things to think about:
  - tensions in the organisation
    - whose agent are you?
  - getting people to talk to you at all
    - how is that conditioned by their organisational role
  - where are you in the scheme of things?
    - the Martian and the Convert

evaluating data sites

- direct observation
  - goal is "the richest possible data"
    - what do we mean by "rich", here?
  - participant observation
  - intensive interviewing

getting in

- again, not usually a problem in the IS case
  - "access" is part of the contract
  - usually, you're a "Known Investigator"
  - inside vs outside?
- but... getting in where?
  - getting "into" the organisation?
  - getting "into" any particular group/task/process?

getting along

- continuing access is important
  - you need these people, they're your livelihood!
- acceptable incompetence
  - they will always know more about their work than you do
- threats
  - factions -- people take sides; which are you on?
  - trade-offs -- how "native" do you go?
  - closed doors and insider understandings
- knowing when to wrap up

getting out

- you need to address this before you start
  - when will you know you're done?
  - how do you extricate yourself smoothly?
    - especially complex when deploying prototypes
    - assuming responsibilities

observation

- learning to look with an ethnographer's eye
  - everything is potentially interesting
  - questions to keep in mind:
    - why was that done?
    - why was it done *just then* and *by so-and-so*?
      - what were the alternatives?
      - why were they not taken?
    - what set of expectations and needs do working arrangements reflect?
    - how did things come to be this way?
- the answers to the questions come later
  - right now, you need to collect the evidence

logging data

- fieldnotes
  - notes, mental and jotted
  - memories, thoughts, vignettes, incidents, quotes
  - the importance of the setting
    - most work practice evolves in situ
    - the environment is tailored to the work
  - field notes are a continual site of activity
    - you need to *write stuff down* -- you *will* forget
    - writing them up *quickly*
    - re-reading and re-working
    - early analytic thoughts...

interviewing

- what's the role of the interview?
  - confirming hypotheses
  - generating hypotheses
  - getting a *point of view*
- interview guide
  - a way to pre-organise the information
  - keeping track
    - interviews generate huge amount of data
    - need to
      - log it
      - keep track of the conversation
      - *direct* the conversation

interviewing

- avoid leading questions
  - they impose your own view on the data
  - they cut off avenues of conversation
- follow up leads
  - don't stick blindly to the interview guide
  - the idea is to learn something new
    - not simply what you expected!

next time

- bring an interview guide
  - using TELE
- more on analysing social settings
  - analysis and putting it all together
  - read Part II of Lofland and Lofland
- introduce the project exercise