# Editorial:
# Research Rules for Library Ethnography

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**Abstract**

- **Paper type**: Opinion
- **Purpose**: To introduce the second part of the theme issue on "User Research and Technology" and to discuss testing online digital library resources using methods from ethnography and cultural anthropology.
- **Design/methodology/approach**:This editorial reviews the literature and research design methods.
- **Findings**: Library and information science as a field is changing and the requirements for top quality research are growing more stringent. This is typical of the experience of other professional fields as they have moved from practitioners advising practitioners to researchers building on past results.
- **Originality/value**: The results of our current research need not merely be interesting, but in so far as possible testable and reproducible.

In her editorial for the first of this two-part theme issue on "User Research and Technology" Elke Greifeneder (2011) wrote that: "Writing about the way we do research is a dangerous task..." I am going to continue in her footsteps and write about how I believe the library community should approach research on users and technology. My focus will be on testing online digital library resources using methods from ethnography and cultural anthropology. Ethnography is the term more often used in Germany and anthropology in the Anglo-American world. I will treat them here as interchangeable.

There is a substantial literature on using cultural anthropology for studying libraries, beginning with "Information Ecologies" by Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day (1999) and continued in works such as "Studying Students" by Nancy Foster and Susan Gibbons (2007). I also recommended anthropological methods as long ago as 1998 in my introduction to a *Library Hi Tech* special issue where I discussed the "roles of anthropological theory ... as tools to help librarians to see the underlying elements in their work and workplaces." In recent years ethnographic user research has expanded substantially. In the Google map "AnthroLib" Nancy Foster has listed 40 projects involving libraries and anthropological research from North America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia. My own (former) student, Michael Stoepel, is listed for his work a project at

the American University of Paris, and if his work is any indication, the quality of these projects is very high.

What does high quality mean in the context of library-based ethnography and what is its relationship to technology and user studies? I would like to suggest three elements: asking the right research question, gathering data that will answer that question, and doing an analysis that gives a convincing answer. These elements sound simple, but they are not.

Asking the right research question is the hardest and most essential step. When anthropology was young, a standard key question was: who are these primitive people and what do they tell us about human society? Since the days of Clifford Geertz, who looked at highly complex but (from a western perspective) still foreign societies, the human subjects have more often come from within our own culture. Librarians looking at users is an example of this, and questions about how users interact (or fail to interact) with the library abound. The danger of looking inward lies in our cultural blindness. Strict research rules offer some corrective.

The best research questions today are ones that lend themselves to a specific answer. I often recommend that students formulate a question that can be answered with a yes or a no, because that forces them to give a concrete answer with a clear justification. Other equally concrete variants can involve a specific number or a set of choices. The point is that a high quality answer should not be a vague description of digital natives in their hunt for information, but serve more as a diagnostic tool along the lines of Clifford Geertz's admonition that the "essential task of theory building here is … not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them. ...The diagnostician doesn't predict measles; he decides that someone has them…" (Geertz, 1973, p. 26) An example might be: does this electronic resource (OPAC, digital library, database, etc.) serve its intended users adequately? It is the library equivalent to asking: does this resource have measles?

The data to answer the question needs to come from a variety of sources. An important starting point is understanding who the intended users are and how to identify them. In teaching I often use the acclaimed "Valley of the Shadow" digital library [1] because it offers an unusual way of structuring information. My German students find it puzzling, since they know little about the US civil war, but they are not the intended audience -- or are they? The Valley of the Shadow digital library itself does not make that clear, and most other web-based resources also do not explicitly define and thus limit their audience. Interviewing the developers may be necessary. Log file statistics may also help to answer the question. If the IP ranges were to show numbers of visitors from other countries, the question might need to be amended to refer to "de facto" rather than "intended" users. The question must be clear or the answer will not be.

Data about how users interact with an electronic resource can be gathered in a variety of ways. Observing individual users in a laboratory setting elicits specific data about that person and that resource, but under highly artificial conditions. An experiment with multiple users in their natural environment (more likely at home than in a lab) can give more general information about the quality of the interaction. A questionnaire asking about the electronic resource, though certainly

a much-used tool, may well give skewed and unreliable results unless the sampling is carefully thought through and controlled.

Analysing the data can take many forms. In classic anthropology, the analysis has tended to be narrative and that may be relevant in, for example, describing a particular user's attempts to come to terms with a particular electronic resource. Numbers convince even more in the modern research world and a statistical analysis of log file data or experimental results can and often should play a key role in answering the research question. There is a danger that humanist-trained librarians or library researchers either will limit themselves to simple numbers and percentages or will apply statistical tests to cases where the assumptions are not met and the results are meaningless.

Some researchers favor qualitative research tools that help to organize interview and observation data. While some of these tools can be very helpful, they can be effective only in the context of an intellectual structure that effectively maps the data to the research question. If a patient has measles, an elevated temperature may be relevant and an itching toe may not be. Interesting parts of an interview or an observation series may ultimately be more like an itching toe and are best ignored.

I have been writing about the role of anthropological research in libraries for well over a decade and much of what I have written has not taken my own advice above. Library and information science as a field is changing and the requirements for top quality research are growing more stringent. This is typical of the experience of other professional fields as they have moved from practitioners advising practitioners to researchers building on past results. For the latter to work, the results of our current research need not merely be interesting, but in so far as possible testable and reproducible.

## NOTES

[1] http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/

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