

Exhibiting ethnographic knowledge: Making sociology about makers of technology

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Grassroots technology practices in suburban Australia

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An exhibition exploring the ways in which technologies are made in suburban Australia.

Exhibiting the 'homebrew high-tech' objects and practices of 'backyard technologists' as well as Kar's own methods of making sociologic knowledge as part of a PhD in Sociology - blogposts, fieldnotes, photos, sketches, objects and film - the exhibition hopes to generate dialogue about improvised, hands-on and object-oriented ways of thinking, and the role of objects in sociological practice.

'Makers', 'Mashers' and 'Mods': Grassroots technology practices in suburban Australia was an exhibition of my recently completed PhD, held in Kingsway Corridor (19-31 October) and launched during the conference marking the 50th anniversary of C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1). The exhibition explored the innovative practices of suburban Australian technology makers operating on the fringes of established centres of innovation. More broadly it reflected upon the role of objects in the making of my sociological knowledge.

Drawing on ethnographies of two not-for-profit technology groups (a volunteer community WiFi network and a bicycle making club) in Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, the exhibition revealed how members collectively customise and adapt discarded, freely available or cheaply purchased materials using improvised methods and their own backyards, re-inscribing them with new meanings and re-imagined possibilities of use. Foregrounding the 'homebrew high-tech' objects and practices of these 'backyard technologists' as well as my own methods of making sociological knowledge

(blogposts, fieldnotes, photos, sketches, objects and film), the exhibition sought to generate dialogue between the central themes of diverse multi-dimensional materials and, at the same time, open up for discussion, improvised, hands-on and object-oriented ways of thinking about and through knowledge production.

This is the second exhibition I have produced. The first was held in 2007 in one of my research fieldsites (2); the yard of a suburban house in South Australia. Drawing on the way my respondents were committed to making their own technological work-in-progress public, the exhibition sought to reveal my process of making sociology about the makers of new technologies. The exhibition was located between a domestic garage and boundary fence and constructed using materials 'at hand'. I affixed photos, printed blogposts, books, sketches and other pieces of writing to lengths of electricity and USB cables using a variety of found materials; old house nails, stickytape and sun-bleached clothes pegs. There was no defined trajectory or guided viewing plan to shape individual experiences. Participants, predominantly respondents

and their families, interacted with my research by literally entering into it, touching, talking about and, at the end of the event, taking away objects, field notes, photos and sketches that interested them. Feedback was immediate and invaluable to my ongoing analysis. It was clear to me that site-specific multi-dimensional interpretations of my research enabled a tactile, visual and sensual engagement with my key findings in a way that differed to that of reading a textual argument or hearing a presentation. Overall, it served to illustrate how the process of carving out space where ideas are open and exploratory invites collaboration from respondents in the making of sociological knowledge.

I highlight three further findings from these experiences:

Spatial inter-connections

Planning an exhibition involves choreographing not only a select series of objects but also the relationships between them. The process of spatially configuring my sociological arguments on the side of a suburban house and in the space of two glass cabinets at College opened up alternate means of interrogating my ideas. I came to see new relationships and connections between images, objects and texts. I was literally able to stand apart from my work and see it from different perspectives. It is rare to have the opportunity to experience field notes and materials in spatial, three dimensional form out of the field. The nature of a standard shared PhD office with a desk, computer, filing cabinet and shelving unit suggests analysis is a relatively contained, neat and two-dimensional process. This space is adequate for listening to interviews, reading, writing and talking with colleagues. My research experience was all of these things and something else, something significantly messier. I continued to encounter my field experiences through an array of material assemblies, many of which demanded more space than my shared office could accommodate. In this way, the exhibitions provided an opportunity to bring to life the textures, nuances and overlapping multi-dimensional character of my encounters with 'backyard technologists'.

Sociological labour

Installing an exhibition is hard work. It takes time, assistance from others and a myriad of behind-the-

scenes materials such as tacks, sticky tape, fishing line, hammer, nails, glue, rulers, pens and pencils, scalpels, rubber bands, cutting mats and scissors. The choice of many of these items necessitates an understanding not only of the materiality of ethnographic objects in focus but the location in which they are displayed. In contrast to the often solitary practice of writing, installing an exhibition is impossible to do without assistance. Help is needed to physically align lengths of fishing line, hammer tacks and nails in at the right angles and manoeuvre large objects (such as bikes) into small spaces. Exhibitions also require ongoing maintenance to ensure arguments do not literally collapse or fall down during the display period. The range of materials and my experience of installing them served to render visible and tangible the complex and very messy ecologies of my ethnographic experience and at the same time broaden my understanding of sociological labour.

Messy practice

The weather played an important role in the Australian exhibition. Had it been raining or too hot, the event would have been postponed or cancelled. As it was, the wind had a significant and undeniable presence. Objects fell over and images blew away. Conversations were triggered not only by the content but also by bits of the exhibition escaping or getting tangled in the wind. I also noticed that blogposts were taken down by participants to read over the barbeque lunch and were replaced later in different locations on the display. Then, when people left they took pieces with them. This meant that the exhibition continued to change throughout the afternoon. It was a messy, dynamic and collaboratively produced experience. Although protected by the weather and contained within glass cabinets, the exhibition in College nevertheless also led to a series of surprising insights and engagements. For instance, a series of unexpected factors emerged during the installation process that helped shape the final display. Given the location of Kingsway Corridor near lecture rooms, I was conscious of making noise and interrupting classes. Therefore, I tried as much as possible to re-use and re-purpose materials left by previous exhibitors. This meant that many of the existing hooks and nails in the ceiling and walls of the cabinets influenced the layout of my objects and images. Similarly, chairs and tables from nearby classrooms, doubling as

ladders, determined the height of my display. The array of materials lining the floors near the cabinet doors, in preparation for installation, also catalysed unexpected happenings. Working inside or near the cabinets, I found I could observe people who passed by and overhear their comments. On several occasions I was able to engage with viewers (students, security guards, visitors, staff), many of whom I would not normally have the chance to talk with about key themes in my work. I found that these informal and serendipitous connections made between ideas, objects and people created a way of reflecting on the 'messes of reality' (3).

Law defines mess as textures, ideas, objects, artefacts, places, people and emotions that are difficult to deal with within the traditional confines of social science methodologies; an indefinable array of complexities that are conventionally ordered and organised in the pursuit of sociological knowledge. He argues that current academic methods of inquiry 'don't really catch' these messy aspects of life (4). Hine has similarly argued that, 'Our methodological instincts are to clean up complexity and tell straightforward linear stories, and thus we tend to exclude descriptions that are faithful to experiences of mess, ambivalence, elusiveness and multiplicity' (5). This desire to clean up actually contradicts our own understanding of the world and, in turn, limits the possibilities of other forms of knowing. Mess affords a way to consider sociological methods that embrace 'impossible or barely possible, unthinkable or almost unthinkable' versions of reality (6). What this means for ethnography involves accepting the presence of multiple unfolding field sites, shifting definitions, representations and meanings that surround them. An example of this is provided by Back, who recounts an exhibition that brought together sociologists and 'subjects' of an urban photography project:

"It was a unique event - I could not imagine a similar equivalent in the context of sociological or anthropological proceedings. It is rare that research participants are present at sociology conferences where their lives are being discussed. Somehow the presence of 'subjects' made it impossible for their representations to be cast of caricature. The people and the images were allowed to be prosaic compounds of vice and virtue, they were allowed to be annoyingly human" (7).

This is what Law and Hine might term 'messy'. It involved a gathering of things, not all of which were in the control of the researcher:

What remains constant through my research is a desire to make public my own sociological mess, namely all the work that takes place in the middle. These exhibitions came about in response to my respondents' practice of sharing the messy tangents and mistakes, haphazard improvised methods and practices in the process of making new technologies. Through this work, I attempt to be 'annoyingly human' (8) and 'remain faithful to experiences of mess' (9) by exposing my vulnerable ideas and random thoughts and seeking responses and feedback in a number of ways.

Although many researchers seek to expose their findings to as wide an audience as possible, the actual making of knowledge into anything other than text is an area that remains critically undeveloped. I anticipate that these experiences will lead to future research that contributes to the work of those who examine the design and production of, and responses to, alternative elucidations of ethnographic data (10).

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- (1) Mills, W. C. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2) Jungnickel, K. (2007) *DIY WiFi: Making homebrew high-technology in Australian suburban backyards*, Pilot Exhibition, 13 January, Adelaide, Australia
- (3) Law, J. (2004) *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, UK: Routledge. pg.2
- (4) Ibid:6
- (5) Hine, C. (2007) 'Multi-sited Ethnography as a Middle range Methodology for Contemporary STS' *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 32, pp. 652-671. pg.12
- (6) Law, J. (2004:6)
- (7) Back, L. (2004) 'Listening With Our Eyes: Portraiture as Urban Encounter', in C, Knowles and P, Sweetman. (eds) *Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination*, London: Routledge. pg. 138
- (8) Ibid:138.
- (9) Hine, C. (2007:12)
- (10) Pink, S. (2001) *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*, London: Sage; Back, L., Halliday, P., Knowles C., Wakeford N and A, Coffey. (2008) *Live Sociology: Practising Social Research with New Media*, Series of Research Workshops, Goldsmiths College, University of London, Accessed: 10.07.08, Available at: <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/livesociology/course-description.pdf>; Knowles, C and P, Sweetman. (eds) (2004) *Picturing the Social Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination*, London: Routledge.

