

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

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# Ethnotelling for User-generated Experiences

## ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on storytelling as a research tool for social sciences, especially for cultural anthropology. After a short review of the main methodological tools traditionally used in ethnography, with particular regard to observation and interview, we focus on collecting and crafting stories (ethnotelling) as suitable tools for conveying the relational nature of fieldwork. Drawing on the works of Orr, Chipchase, Marradi and Adwan/Bar-on, we show how stories – collected, mediated or made up – are valuable tools for representing experiences and identities. As a result, we suggest a different approach to user-experience design, based on the creation of ‘thick’ environments enabling a whole range of possibilities, where users can imagine or live their own user-generated experiences.*

## INTRODUCTION: SHIFTS

The structural design of information spaces, in particular on the web, is an activity that often challenges supposedly immutable notions, such as communication, relationship, business, consumption. Innovations follow one another in rapid succession thanks to killer RIAs (Rich Internet Applications), which makes the Web an ever-changing productive and social environment.

If we look at the most common job titles for web professionals from a diachronic perspective, we can identify a common thread among them, a trend that binds them together: a shift from technology design to information design, with user experience (“people”) as the ultimate object of interest. What does it mean “*to design meanings and experiences in information-thick worlds*”, and how can we approach this task? Cultural anthropology, as a holistic approach to the study of humans, and ethnography, as its main heuristic tool based on a direct research experience in the field, can be regarded as the best tools for providing some answers, or at least some clues, to these issues.

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This first chapter focuses on structural changes – related to authorship, space, and media – which have challenged the researcher’s authority, the meaning of ‘field’, and the linearity of ethnographic narratives.

The second chapter points out the strengths and limits of the most common ethnographic techniques: observation and interview.

The third chapter introduces the concept of ethnotelling, i.e. a combination of ethnographic techniques and storytelling, which is regarded as a suitable device for overcoming the traditional ethnographic authority by building a dialogic relationship based on reciprocity.

The fourth chapter discusses advantages and opportunities for information architects to use ethnotelling as a tool for carrying out part of their user research activities aimed at collecting/crafting/combining stories. The ambitious goal is to shift the focus from the design of structures and paths to the design of spaces able to open up a whole range of possibilities, where users are provided with suitable tools for creating their own user-generated experience.

## First Shift. Beyond Authorship: The Work of Consumption

Design traditionally implies a strong sense of authorship. In the collective imagination, designers are regarded as celebrities who, thanks to ingenious ideas, create products, instruments and concepts for new worlds.

This conception of designers was challenged by the user-centred design at the end of the Sixties, inspired by professionals such as Liz Sanders and Jane Fulton Suri, both with a background in social research. These pioneers suggested that end users should be involved in the product design process.

The subsequent development of participatory design was a real Copernican revolution: knowledge and ideas are no longer a prerogative of designers of world renown, or a result of brainstorming sessions among creative professionals, but come from the users themselves. The slogan of this revolution was “*design with, not for, people*”. The so-called “work of consumption” pointed out by Marx in his *Grundrisse*<sup>2</sup> was proposed for the first time as heuristics, with shattering effects.

The philosophy and practice of building a dialogic relationship with a specific group of people so as to create something together, starting from their desires, expectations, values and imagination, was the basis for cultural anthropology and design to converge.

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<sup>2</sup> *The massive series of notebooks that Marx wrote in 1857-58 as preparatory studies for Capital was published for the first time in 1939.*

Such was the interest excited by this prolific convergence of studies that a number of courses, master classes and PhD programmes in design anthropology<sup>3</sup> have been introduced in the last few years. The metaphor of the busy intersection helps define a new field of studies that fruitfully interweaves different (even conflicting) approaches, such as product and service design, participatory innovation, ethnography, cultural anthropology, gnosiology, cognitive psychology etc.

Design Anthropology is an expression formed by juxtaposition, a sort of surrealist collage that aims to create a sense of *ostranenie*<sup>4</sup>. “*Anthropology of design*” would take on a whole different meaning, implying a hierarchical, metonymic or causal relationship between the two components.

This is neither a science with its own object of study nor a science adopting a new methodology. The *anthrodesign* neologism is a *crisis* that perfectly expresses this sort of busy intersection, where neither of the two components is subordinate to the other.

## Second Shift. Hybrid, Curved Space: Cyber & Hyper

The concept of field is a spatial metaphor that runs through the entire history of ethnography.

Defining a field means delimiting, creating a *limen*, a threshold (Turner 1982). In photography, framing a picture means consciously selecting what is going to be shot, leaving out all the rest, which will be “off screen”. It also means severing any relation between what is in the frame and what is outside. By expanding the frame to include more of the scene it is actually possible to recontextualise the elements framed and give them a whole new meaning. James Clifford defined the field as a “serious fiction” (Clifford 2003:18) around which an intertwining of historicised dialogic relations called ethnography is organised.

Cyberanthropology (Lévy 1994), as a pioneering ethnographic research carried out in the virtual spaces created by the new technologies, had found its own field: cyberspace. Cyberpunk literature and films (Tron, Matrix, Donnie Darko, Strange Days, and many others) have strongly influenced the collective imagination, always representing cyberspace as a world ‘other’ than reality, a parallel universe (multiverse). Between Lewis Carrol and Second Life there is a thread of continuity: the imagination of a space that is beyond, apart from reality, which can be accessed through thresholds represented by ordinary instruments (a mirror or a web interface). Once we enter this ‘other’ space,

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<sup>3</sup> For example at the University of Aberdeen & Southern Denmark, the University of Illinois - Chicago, and at the Kansas State University.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘ostranenie’ was first used by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art as Technique” (1917).

all the relationships with the ‘real’ one are severed and we are allowed to invent a new (second) life.

This compartmental view of physical and virtual spaces has now lost any reason for being. The ‘middle earth’ between the real world and what was supposed to be the cyberspace has broadened out of proportion, making the opposite poles meet and blur in a sort of augmented reality, enhanced and hybridised by technology: a hypereality. “*Cyberspace is not a place you go to but rather a layer tightly integrated into the world around us*” (Institute For The Future 2008).

### Third Shift. Beyond the Medium: Cross Media and Web as an Ecosystem

Until a few years ago the prevailing metaphor for indicating the main task of world web workers was the shift, intended as displacement, meaning the creation of devices and applications for transferring the world to the web. Institutions, companies, media: the challenge was to make everything available on a browser, in a 24/7 self-service perspective.

Emerging nanotechnologies able to make computers invisible (Norman 1998) seem to have confirmed the ubiquitous computing (Weiser 1991) visionary theories, questioning the media convergence model (Jenkins 2006) in favour of an environment where information is embedded in objects (mindful body, mindful artefacts) and distributed throughout a variety of media (cross media), each with specific, original, complementary or even opposing contents (Giovagnoli 2009:63). The Web was erroneously regarded as an instrument among others, a medium, so that it was enough to just move one’s activity from one medium to the other.

The Web is not a medium, though. It is an ecosystem, an immersive environment made up of dialogic relationships, proper conversations (Locke et al 2000) occurring between people, brands, companies, institutions, groups, avatars, bots, and a number of other players, who negotiate fluctuating identities and cultures, and establish transient, fragmentary connections.

The continuous dialogue and exchange of roles between authors and users produce the hyperauthors of new narratives (Giovagnoli 2009), which populate, enhance or reinvent our imagination: “*The work of consumption is as fully social as it is symbolic, no less work for involving the discipline of imagination*” (Appadurai 1996:82–83).

The Web has definitely come out of desktop computers to become a system of social, symbolic, economic, and media relations, so much so as to be the emblem of Bateson’s “*pattern that connects*”, a ubiquitous ecology (Resmini & Rosati 2009).

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Cultural anthropology<sup>5</sup> is characterised by a non-standard, idiographic approach, its analysis being aimed at the hermeneutical understanding of the contexts in which phenomena are embedded.

Initially exclusively based on the comparative study of cultures, anthropology has developed in many directions. In the last two centuries, anthropology studies have adopted a wide range of research techniques. This toolbox constitutes its greatest resource, and is made up of different instruments, each with specific applications:

- Reactive observations: monitoring people's behaviour while consciously exerting an influence on the subjects under scrutiny;
- Non-reactive observations: monitoring people's behaviour without intentionally influencing the subjects under scrutiny by means of verbal or behavioural solicitations, or manipulative interventions;
- Immersions: getting inside the natural environment of people's everyday life, monitoring what they do, how they interact, what kinds of objects they use, etc.;
- Hermeneutic, narrative, and in-depth interviews: trying to elicit the interviewee's personal view of the world;
- Artefact analysis: interpreting the objects (both textual and non-textual) used and produced by the people we intend to study;
- Performance: using performances and games to create the context of interaction;
- Self-documentation: providing participants with instruments that allow them to create their own self-representation, or asking them to keep a diary and take note of their daily experiences.

This non-exhaustive inventory has been, and is being, constantly updated thanks to ground-breaking studies able to combine existing techniques or develop new ones, as in the case of participant observation, which was successfully introduced by a leading figure such as Bronislaw Malinowski. The very concept of "participant observation" is quite an oxymoron based on a combination of techniques, such as immersion, observation and in-dept interview, carefully crafted by the researcher (the ethnographer), traditionally an experienced academic.

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<sup>5</sup> *The concept of culture was brilliantly defined by Weber: "Culture is a finite segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance." (Weber, 1922)*

Between the 1930s and the 1970s, the idea of anthropological research as an intensive practice in a defined field progressively established itself internationally, becoming the only reliable source of information on exotic populations as well as a scientific means of cultural representation for academics. After Malinowski, there was an increasing confusion between anthropology, intended as a variety of approaches to the study of culture, and ethnography, meaning the process (i.e. the immersive and prolonged research experience) and the final outcome (namely, the academic monograph) of an intensive research work in the field (fieldwork).

The break-up and redistribution of colonial power in the decades after 1950 revealed the asymmetric nature of this idea of fieldwork, where the academic researcher from a western country was regarded as the only legitimate source of anthropological knowledge on other cultures. The intensive research experience in the field, a real rite of passage in the researcher's career, therefore implied a power relationship where subject and object of observation were clearly separate. The researcher's authority was scientifically validated by the assumption that it was possible to have a truthful cultural portrait based on a unique, one-off experience.

In the same way, the current breaking down of authorship and of the distinction between producer and consumer, the difficulty of identifying a defined field where digital experiences occur, and the belonging to a shared dialogic ecosystem, are processes that increasingly reveal the limits of the traditional concepts of culture and field. The anthropological approach has a new opportunity for renewing itself by adopting an ethnographic practice based on reciprocity and on a variety of viewpoints. In this perspective, in order to deconstruct the colonialist paradigm of the ethnographic authority, it is necessary to have an in-depth understanding of the classical ethnographic research methods, namely observation and interview, pointing out their strengths and limits.

## Observation

Direct observation is commonly considered as a guarantee of objectivity, as expressions like *"I saw you with my eyes"* and *"I don't believe if I don't see"* suggest. Well before the scientific method and the observation techniques were formalised, in 1633 the Catholic Church accused Galileo of using an improper object: the telescope. This means of intermediation between the eye and reality was regarded as a foreign body, a deceptive device, because only the naked-eye view was accepted as trustworthy.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, this cultural-scientific paradigm was progressively undermined. First, Empiro-Criticism (Poincaré, Mach) questioned the positivist separation between theory and observation, then the studies on the constituents of matter (atoms) and on the discrete units of energy (quantum theory) opened the way

for Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (1927). All these studies drew on a common gnosiological basis: empirical observation, the very perception of reality, does not provide an objective picture, but is biased by the researcher's reference theory, which means that observation is not a neutral or truthful research instrument.

The observer's stock of knowledge, made up of beliefs, concepts and theories, plays a fundamental role in influencing his/her perception. According to American philosopher Norwood Russell Hanson, the perception of an ordinary object, of our daily life, is only made possible by our preconceptions. Going back to the motion of the Earth, we can say that Aristotle, Brahe, Kepler and Galileo were subject to the same sensory stimulus, but saw different things. Observation is therefore a theory-laden process (Hanson 1958:19), an interpretative experience shaped by prior knowledge. This awareness undermines all the certainties of the early 20th-century ethnography, based on Bronislaw's and Malinowski's assumption: "*It may be given to us for a moment to enter into the soul of a savage and through his eyes to look at the outer world and feel ourselves what it must feel to him to be himself*" (Malinowski 1922/2003:407).

Provided that this is possible, taking on the point of view of the other is not, however, a guarantee of objectivity.

## Interview

In the anthropological tradition, dialogue with interlocutors has always played a crucial role in fieldwork research: ethnographic notes are often accompanied by reports of interviews, transcriptions, and comments on the answers provided by the informant, i.e. the privileged interlocutor<sup>6</sup>.

The aim of the interview is to "*access the perspective of the person being interviewed, capturing detailed information about the individual's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and motives*" (Corbetta 2003:69-70). An interview is different from a normal conversation because it is explicitly asked for by the interviewer, addressed to a conspicuous number of non-randomly selected individuals, and related to a specific research goal. Besides, contrary to what happens in a normal conversation, speakers do not take turns spontaneously. As Corbetta suggests, this is more like a "*guided conversation, where the interviewer sets the agenda for the interview, and makes sure that it serves the interviewer's research purposes*" (2003:71).

It is possible to distinguish between various types of interview, depending on the degree of freedom given to interviewee and interviewer, and on the symmetry and depth of their relationship. In interviews conducted using a structured questionnaire, the

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<sup>6</sup> Interview is the most used technique to collect information in social sciences: according to Bichi (2002), interviews are used in 90% of the studies. In this regard, back in 1993, Silverman already talked about "interview society".



information gathered is organised into a data matrix, and interviews are characterised by a high degree of standardisation and directivity<sup>7</sup>. In an “*in-depth*”<sup>8</sup> or “*non-directive*” interview, instead, the interviewer only introduces a topic, leaving the interviewee free to develop it as it suits him/her best.

Even in this semi-structured form of interview, aimed at collecting texts rather than statistics, there is an asymmetrical power relationship between the two interlocutors: the interviewer is always the one who sets the goals of interaction and defines the questions to be asked in order to achieve the pre-established research objectives; the interviewee can only answer, as honestly as possible.

Asymmetry is partly balanced in another particular form of interview, the narrative interview (Poggio, 2004), which aims at eliciting stories of self-lived experiences. While telling a story, depending on the context, the interviewee is free to choose the information to be retrieved from his or her memory storage, and to decide what aspects to highlight and what parts to leave out: “*talking about oneself to another means getting out of oneself, consciously building a coherent narrative, rationalising and taking the distance, so as to produce a narrative that takes account of the past, comes to term with memory, and mixes truth, lived experience, learning, and imagination*” (Bichi 2002:27). In a narrative interview, even if the one who tells the story is the interviewee, the interviewer still maintains a crucial role, actively intervening in the storytelling process, prompting the interviewee to clarify some aspects or drop others. The final story will be a mutual construction of meaning. Telling one’s experience is a mutual process that we often perform in our daily social interactions.

## ETHNOTELLING

Ethnotelling is a *crisis* of ethnography and storytelling, and refers to a proposal: starting from the ethnographic practice, leaving out the objectivist assumptions of observation and the asymmetry implied in the interviewer–interviewee relationship, and using storytelling to develop a dialectical combination of experience and interpretation based on reciprocity.

A story is much more than a sum of statements. It is a relation. “*A story is more than just a transfer of information. It’s an active mechanism for communicating events,*

<sup>7</sup> Directivity is intended as the possibility for the researcher to define the contents of the interview, with a consequent lack of freedom for the interviewee in deciding the contents of his/her own answers (Bichi, 2002). In a structured questionnaire, with pre-coded answers, the degree of directivity is the highest.

<sup>8</sup> The ‘in-depth’ label, generally associated to this data collection technique, refers to the aim of collecting information more thoroughly. However, many authors (Cardano 1999; Bichi, 2002) criticise this assumption, because “depth” cannot be automatically guaranteed by the use of a specific technique or instead questioned whenever other instruments are used. For this reason, some scholars prefer to use other expressions, such as “qualitative interview” (Corbetta 2003; Gianturco 2004), “discursive interview” (Cardano 1999), or “hermeneutical interview” (Montesperelli 1998).



*communicating contextual information, and for developing connections between people*” (Quesenbery & Brooks 2010:19). Ethnography and storytelling share this intrinsically social character: ethnographic practice is a situated dialogue, an exchange between the other and me as ever-changing identities. Ethnography as a textual strategy is the meta-narrative of this dialogue, of the relationships established in the fieldwork, but the written text is just a poor objectification of this process.

Ethnotelling is an attempt to overcome such objectification, which has traditionally been presented as *“the only logical order by which it is possible to account for the ethnographic experience”* (Canevacci in Forero Angel & Simeone 2010:18).

In the last few years, many studies have focused on narratives, drawing on a variety of methodological approaches depending on the specific research objectives and the researchers’ personal attitudes. The following narratives are related to four studies carried out in different contexts and research fields, and represent four original ways to use storytelling at different stages of the research process. They belong, as of right, to the researcher’s toolbox, which is often enriched with ad hoc innovations that may not be regarded as methodological tools able to exhaustively convey the ethnographic fieldwork, but nevertheless have the merit to highlight the heuristic power of storytelling.

## Stories as a Shared Space

### *Talking About Machines*

*Julian Orr was an anthropology student with a great sense of curiosity, but poor follow-up. In 1966 he left college and joined the army. During military service he started repairing electrical appliances, and continued to do so even after being discharged from the army, when he decided to start studying again. In 1979 his research project in Afghanistan was postponed to a date to be fixed due to the political circumstances of the time. Thus Orr went back to his full-time job as a technician at Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). There he came up with this idea: studying what photocopier technicians actually did, not what they were assumed to do.*

*Xerox Corporation provided technicians with very detailed diagnostic and repair manuals. For the company, it was an ordinary, prescriptive process. Customers having difficulty called the Customer Service Centre. The Centre, in turn, notified a technician. He or she then went to the customer’s site. With the help of error codes, which reported the machine’s state, and documentation, the technician diagnosed the problem and followed instructions for fixing it.*

*Being a technician himself, Orr realised that the daily practice of a photocopier technician was made up of creative choices, continuous improvisations, within a triangular relationship between customers, technical manuals and machines. In his “ethnography of work”, he found out that, even among machines of the same models, photocopiers may differ in their performance from one another. Each machine was a single case, a story of its own. Although the documentation gave technicians a map, the critical question for them was what to do when they fell off the map. It was simple: they took a break and had lunch together.*

*Orr found out that a lunch with co-workers could be worth hours of training. While having their meal, technicians mainly talked about work. They offered problem-solving tips, gave advice, and discussed the most frustrating problems. The informal occasions when technicians gathered were in fact a fundamental moment for them to share their work practices through narratives. Without them even knowing it, they exchanged tacit knowledge through fun stories about failures and mistakes.*

The main result of Orr’s ethnographic study was to point out the intrinsically social nature of the learning process. A community of practice develops a collective pool of knowledge that any member can draw upon. That pool transcends any individual member’s knowledge and is made up of intertwining stories of self-lived experiences that mix together until they lose any personal character. The whole set of individual narratives turns into a social space where knowledge can be exchanged: stories are a shared space.

## Stories as Field Data

### *Mobile Essentials*

*Jan Chipchase is a researcher who travels the world to study human behaviour patterns, gathering insights that he turns into innovative solutions for business products. He is exactly the kind of guy who already knows what we carry in our backpacks or what is stored in our freezers.*

*One of his most famous studies is Mobile Essentials (2005), a cross-cultural field study of what people take with them when they leave home. It starts from a few simple questions: what do we take with us every day? What do we actually use? Chipchase observed and interviewed dozens of people living in different countries, and found out that the conscious or subconscious selection process is influenced by functional, spiritual and emotional factors. Considering home as a membrane between outside (where we take things with us) and inside, the author introduces the notion of “centre of gravity”, that is the place, in our home, where we are expected to keep the*

*core items to be carried out. People's carrying behaviour crosses the borders between outside and inside the home space.*

*Therefore, to study behaviour patterns, it is not enough to observe people outside their homes. We need to study their domestic space.*

Through observation and interviews, Chipchase collected a series of stories so as to compare them and highlight common traits and differences in order to introduce new uses or facilitate non-conventional uses for technologies or products<sup>9</sup>. A corpus of stories is a very rich dataset that lends itself to complex statistical and textual analyses.

## Stories as Tools

### *Telling stories*

*Alberto Marradi is a social research methodologist. At the beginning of the 1980s, in a study of civic culture, he introduced storytelling as a methodological tool for studying values, meaning those general ideas or concepts that we use as evaluation criteria for choices and behaviours. As Marradi (2005) argues, storytelling is a traditional means of transmitting values and justifying norms. The parables of the Bible are narratives. In the last few years, narratives have also started playing a central role in human sciences.*

*The idea is that storytelling allows the interviewer to avoid the lack of spontaneity implied by straightforward questions, and triggers a projective identification process that leads the interviewee to make a stand on a given subject in a less controlled way. Moreover, narratives allow the researcher to collect relevant background information: "Through detailed narratives – Marradi (1996) points out – it is possible to elicit a great deal of tacit knowledge". Narratives are generally inspired by real episodes or designed to look like real.*

*It is necessary to explicit a great number of details, which serve as anchor points and allow the interviewee to focus on relevant information. After telling the core episode of the narrative, the interviewer generally asks a short question about what the protagonist of the story will or would do in that circumstance: this makes it possible, in some cases, to trigger a "projective mechanism" in the interviewee, and elicit more honest, less mediated, answers. In over thirty years of research, Marradi and a large team of researchers have crafted stories related to a wide range of values, such as: normativism; particularism vs. universalism; responsibility vs. dependence; passivity vs. activity; authoritarianism vs. tolerance; traditionalism vs. secularisation. Recently, Mariotti*

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<sup>9</sup> In Uganda, the story of "Sente" shows how a mobile phone can be turned into a rudimental ATM machine in rural areas with no communication technologies or bank systems.

*(2010) has used stories to investigate the concept of democracy in the MPs from Berlusconi's Forza Italia party.*

The stories proposed by Marradi are based on real events. Starting from narratives collected through techniques such as narrative interviews, or similarly to Chipchase's study, it is possible to identify "ideal stories"<sup>10</sup> to be submitted to a more or less numerous sample of individuals, depending on the research objectives. One of the advantages in adopting such a tool is the possibility to combine the richness of narratives with a more structured and standardised analysis, which makes it possible to extend it to larger samples and carry out a matrix-based data.

## Stories as Textual Strategies

### *Learning Each Other's Historical Narrative*

*Al-Nakba is a term that many people are not familiar with. Literally, it means "catastrophe" and is used by Arabs, Palestinians in particular, to indicate the exodus from their territory started on May 15, 1948, with the end of the British protectorate, when 700,000 people were forced to leave their homes and live in refugee camps. Every year, Palestinians commemorate this event, but in February 2010, the Knesset, Israel's Parliament, enacted a law<sup>11</sup> denying the Palestinians the right to mourn the loss of their homeland on May 15, because for Israelis that was a feast day: the Independence Day.*

*Previously<sup>12</sup>, Israeli Minister of Education had recalled all copies of a textbook addressed to Arab students with the accusation of misrepresenting the history of the foundation of the State of Israel.*

*The multi-year project by Sami Adwan and Dan Bar-On, two Professors and co-directors of the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME), fits in with this context. Sami was Palestinian and Dan Israeli. Both started from a common observation: schoolchildren studying history in times of war or conflict learn only one side of the story – their own – which is, of course, considered to be the "right" one. In order to challenge this form of contemporary ethnocentrism based on monolithic, one-sided narratives, the authors took on the project of developing a textbook written by*

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<sup>10</sup> The notion of "ideal stories" is analogous to Weber's "ideal type".

<sup>11</sup> The reference is to the first version of the law proposed by ultra-orthodox Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, according to which people caught up marking the Nakba could be jailed for up to three years. This version of the law was opposed by all Arab Israelis (one fifth of the population), who, for the first time, were prohibited from expressing a feeling: the grief for what they considered a tragic event. Afterwards, the law was amended. The new law forbids all public institutions funded by the State (local institutions, schools, organisations) to organise Al-Nakba commemoration events.

<sup>12</sup> The episode goes back to October 2009, as reported by the daily newspaper Haaretz.

*both parties, a dual narrative where the ones could tell the others their side of the story. The purpose was not to present historical events neutrally or impartially, but to mix together the two macro-stories, so as to create a textbook where to discuss history, not just learn it.*

*The initial project involved 12 history teachers, 6 Israelis and 6 Palestinians, as researchers in the field: the school. Teachers were trained to collect pupils' narratives and turn them into a collective book. From 2003 up today, two textbooks have been published, with narratives on different historical events occurred between 1900 and 2000. A forthcoming third book will focus on the second Intifada, from 2000 to 2010. Each book was designed so that on each page, in between the Palestinian and Israeli narratives, there is space for developing a third narrative, a sort of bridge created by the readers' personal narratives. These textbooks have not been approved by Israeli Minister of Education.*

The mutual exchange of narratives says who we are, what we have around. Telling one's story, or having it told by others, is a way to express our identity, to question it. In Palestine, where divisions, wars and walls have always been built upon the sense of belonging to monolithic identities, such mutual exchange of narratives is a way to create the necessary conditions for a possible coexistence based on the mutual acceptance of each other's stories. By featuring stories, instead of "History", the textbook breaks the asymmetry between the narrator's authority and the narrated subjectivity. This asymmetry is further reduced by the white space between the narratives, which invites the reader, i.e. the consumer of the editorial product, to take part in its production process.

## ETHNOTELLING AND INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

Ethnotelling is an approach that combines contextual analysis (in-context observation) and user research sessions conducted through individual or group narrative interviews. It is a combination of techniques aimed at establishing reciprocal relationships where the roles of observer/interviewer and observed/interviewee are interchangeable. It is also a diachronic process, because relationships are not limited to a single research session, but become valuable over time and create opportunities for new meetings.

Every information architecture project is the result of a research process aimed at studying the complex mutual dependence between users, contexts, and contents. The structure and vocabulary of a story represent a possible dialogue between one subject and the other, whether they are individuals, companies, institutions, or avatars. This dialogue, as in the design of information architecture, occurs in any case (Rosenfeld & Morville 1998). Designing information architecture means starting from users' needs,

from the context of their experiences (i.e. information retrieval or playful surfing). In a user research study, narratives can be used as context/data/tool/product and may turn out to be useful at different stages of an information architecture project. Here follow some examples:

- Stories as a context: apart from providing specific information on the research object, narratives allow the researcher to capture many other aspects of users' lives and perceptions. This whole set of narratives provides a frame within which to interpret the interviewees' statements and the results of the studies carried out to gain new insights.
- Stories as data: the stories recounted by our interlocutors and collected by a team of information architects are an extraordinary resource to shape personas and scenarios on the basis of the experiences directly reported by users. This corpus of stories can be subjected to a statistical-textual analysis aimed at identifying users' reference vocabulary, which can be very helpful for designing or validating labeling systems.
- Stories as a tool: when running tests with users, it is a common practice to ask them to perform activities, such as finding some content or carrying out a task. The guidelines for these activities are short stories administered to users in order to evaluate the efficacy of searching and browsing systems.
- Stories as a product: one of the recurring activities in the information architects' practice is communicating the value of their job to their team. There are always distrustful stakeholders who need to decide whether they should continue to invest in IA or not. Communicating one's job through stories (case studies, user journeys) is a strategy to involve interlocutors and make presentations and reports more appealing.

## OUT-ROUTE: INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE AND CROSSMEDIA EXPERIENCES

As authorship is shattered into thousands of fragments, the real is interwoven with the virtual in a hybrid space, technology becomes invisible, and media intertwine across ubiquitous technologies such as the Web – we rediscover the meaning of the experiential act. As philosopher Michel Serres argues,

*“(l)a sagesse multimillénaire des langues gréco-latines a formé ce mot d'expérience au moyen de deux prépositions: ex, qui signifie le départ, volontaire ou forcé, hors du milieu usuel ou initial, et per, qui décrit le voyage à travers un nouveau monde, tout autre. Ce double mouvement, d'arrachement et d'étrangeté, dans l'errance et la pérégrination, implique*



*des risques physiques, donc de mort et de bannissement social et politique, ce pour quoi le terme d'expérience avoisine celui de péril et y trouve une racine*<sup>13</sup>(1995:25).

In the pervasive communication space, in everywhere (Greenfield 2006), across the hybrid boundaries of media increasingly intertwined in a sort of crossmedia (Jenkins 2006) or cross-channel continuum (Resmini & Rosati 2011), experience stands out as the only possible *trait d'union*. Far from being intended as a form of knowledge aimed at reaching some neo-empirical truth, experience is rather a process, a metaphorical journey that allows us to move across borders.

Collecting, combining, or creating stories is a way to describe experiences:

*“narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, trans-historical, trans-cultural: it is simply there, like life itself.” (Barthes 1966/1977:79).*

By adopting a narrative form, we make sense of our experiences, trace trajectories and identify thresholds, such as the beginning and the end of a story. Each narrative conveys a point of view, a situated experience, which can be either real or imaginary and intertwine with others. The challenge of information architecture, and of experience design as a whole, is to use such richness to shift the focus from the design of experiences intended as unequivocal paths shaped once and for all, to the collaborative design of environments as open fields of possibilities and meanings, which make it possible to move, cross borders, and go adrift.

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<sup>13</sup> “The multi-thousand-year wisdom of the Greek-Latin languages coined the term “experience” by means of two prepositions: “ex”, which means moving away, voluntarily or forcedly, from a familiar or initial environment, and “per”, which indicates the journey through a new world, a completely different one. This dual movement, of detachment and estrangement, of departure and peregrination, entails some physical risks, from social and political banishment up to death. For this reason, the word experience is close to that of peril, with which it shares a common root”. Translation by the author.



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