Trace Ethnography Workshop

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Abstract
This workshop introduces participants to trace ethnography, building a network of scholars interested in the collection and interpretation of trace data and distributed documentary practices. The intended audience is broad, and participants need not have any existing experience working with trace data from either qualitative or quantitative approaches. The workshop provides an interactive introduction to the background, theories, methods, and applications–present and future–of trace ethnography. Participants with more experience in this area will demonstrate how they apply these techniques in their own research, discussing various issues as they arise. The workshop is intended to help researchers identify documentary traces, plan for their collection and analysis, and further formulate trace ethnography as it is currently conceived. In all, this workshop will support the advancement of boundaries, theories, concepts, and applications in trace ethnography, identifying the diversity of approaches that can be assembled around the idea of 'trace ethnography' within the iSchool community.
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1   Introduction

Given the massive amount of trace data generated and collected by information systems, it is no surprise academic researchers and industry practitioners increasingly analyze trace data with highly-quantitative and automated approaches. In *qualitative* methodology texts, trace data is often relegated to "secondary methods" or "unobtrusive techniques;" data sources seen as supplementary to 'actual' lived experience. What if we analyze trace data as a *primary mode of participation*, a core way in which people engage with their social worlds? What if this analysis is not only seen as a detached mode of surveillance, but something the ethnographer must actively engage as a mode of participant-observation?

This approach to framing the primary role of trace data in ethnographic practice has many predecessors across disciplines and has gained traction in recent years under the banner of "trace ethnography." Trace ethnography has been used to study how wikipedians identify and ban vandals (Geiger and Ribes 2010), how protesters in Tunisia assemble using social media (Wulf et al 2013), the memory practices in scientific laboratories (Shankar 2006; Thomer and Twidale 2014), how patients engage in healthcare practices (Willis and Østerlund 2013), and collaboration in open source software projects (Howison and Crowston 2012). Furthermore, many researchers have been explicitly theorizing the role of digital trace data in ethnographic practice (Geiger and Ribes 2011, Sawyer, Kaziunas, and Osterlund 2012; Boellstorff et al. 2012). It is of note that much of this scholarship takes place within the iSchools and is presented at the iConference, and the 2013 iConference panel on trace ethnography generated many rich discussions.

2   Workshop Goals

This workshop introduces participants to trace ethnography, building a network of scholars interested in the collection and interpretation of trace data and distributed documentary practices. The intended audience is broad, and participants need not have any existing experience working with trace data from either qualitative or quantitative approaches. The workshop provides an interactive introduction to the background, theories, methods, and applications–present and future–of trace ethnography. Participants with more experience in this area will demonstrate how they apply these techniques in their own research, discussing various issues as they arise. This workshop will help researchers identify documentary traces, plan for their collection and analysis, and further formulate trace ethnography as it is

currently conceived. In all, this workshop will support the advancement of boundaries, theories, concepts, and applications in trace ethnography, identifying the diversity of approaches that can be assembled around the idea of 'trace ethnography.'

3   Workshop Overview

In the first half of the day, workshop organizers and selected participants will discuss the history and foundations of trace ethnography, including where it fits into the interdisciplinary configuration of the iSchools. The introductory activity will interactively involve participants asking how they approach digital traces, use them in their research, and examine documentary practices in their own work. Participants will divide into several small groups throughout the morning to enable a broader range of issues relating to trace data, such as: data collection, analytical strategies, research ethics, and disciplinary divides.

In the second half of the workshop, we will demonstrate various "behind the scenes" aspects of trace identification, collection, and interpretation. We propose two breakout sessions based on complementary outcomes for participants. One breakout session will be a technical workshop focused on the practical possibilities and challenges in working with trace data. There will be a broad overview about finding, collecting, and managing digital traces from the web and APIs (like blogs or Twitter). Additionally, this breakout session will discuss *where* and *how* scholars can obtain the technical skills to work with trace data. Advanced technological knowledge is not necessarily required. Given the short time this session will focus on providing participants with an understanding of the technical possibilities and pointers to further resources (Wilson 2006, Russell 2013).

A second breakout session will be organized around the themes of analysis and interpretation—that is, how do information scientists examine trace documents in highly mediated socio-technical environments. Instead of definitively determining a single set of canonical approaches, this breakout session seeks to map the multiplicity of strategies and tactics that can be considered part of what it means to do trace ethnography.

In the last hour of the day, participants will come back together to reflect upon the breakout sessions, working towards identifying common and divergent themes. Interested participants will later work on writing a whitepaper to provide a guiding framework for those other scholars in the iSchools (and beyond) who are interested in understanding trade data using trace ethnography.

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