Narratives of engagement:
Working at the intersections of information, social, and domain science

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OBJECTIVES

Engagement – sometimes called action research, contribution, or intervention – is the participation of the researcher in the object of study. It is a key contemporary feature in making iSchool research accessible and relevant to broader communities. However, it also presents novel challenges for the traditional academic endeavor. We have many 'shorthands' for these difficulties: misaligned reward structures, diverging goals, miscommunication across heterogeneous expertises, multiple membership, challenges of multidisciplinary collaboration, or unrealistic expectations on social science. Often these difficulties are precisely what our research attempts to address but only rarely do we give ourselves leeway to discuss how they affect our own practice. We have arranged this session to open and encourage discourse on the experiences, approaches and outcomes of engagement.

The core of the presentations will be centered on storytelling. Stories, or narratives, are ideal devices for capturing and conveying the complexities of real world field experiences. The four participants in this interactive panel will recount exemplary narratives of their engagement at the intersections of social research, information studies and domain sciences. These stories will serve as the material for an open discussion. Our participants were selected both for their *diverse* modes of interface with their objects of study and a *shared* commitment to engaging social /information/domain science. This includes a range of activities stretching from policy recommendations, to participant observation or contributions to technology design; from distanced roles such as 'shrink wrapped' consulting, to long view historical studies, to becoming a daily members and 'stakeholders' in the success of projects.

STRUCTURE

This interactive session will be 1.5 hours in length.

The session will begin with participants' brief presentations recounting a single exemplary experience of engagement and the research questions these activities have generated. We will then open the floor to discussion amongst presenters and with the audience.

The goal of this session are for the stories themselves to act as common starting points for a

collective discussion on the work (and pleasures) of engagement. Topics will emerge organically from discussion. This said, below are some of the topics we expect will come to structure the conversation:

- Venues for communicating approaches and findings back to our colleagues
- Traditions of 'objective' and 'subjective' research
- 'Going native'
- Methods or best-practices for collaboration
- The mythos of 'social engineering'
- Cautions in becoming 'a service science'
- Factors informing a good engagement
- Funding opportunities and dangers
- 'Outsourcing the social'
- Developing long-term partnerships

EQUIPMENT

Digital Projector.

White board or flip-chart

PARTICIPANTS

David Ribes is a postdoctoral research investigator. Trained as a sociologist at UC San Diego he currently holds a position at the University of Michigan, School of Information. Throughout his academic career David has worked with computer and domain scientists, studying and participating in the construction of large scale information infrastructure for the sciences (cyberinfrastructure). His dissertation research focused on the practical work of participants in the GEON project (cyberinfrastructure for the earth sciences) and today he continues this work through comparisons of projects for the geo- and environmental sciences.

Thomas A. Finholt is research professor and associate dean for research and innovation at the School of Information, University of Michigan. Tom's research focuses on the design, deployment, and use of cyberinfrastructure in science and engineering. He was a co-developer of the world's first operational collaboratory, the Upper Atmospheric Research Collaboratory (UARC) , which was a finalist in the science category for the 1998 Smithsonian/Computerworld awards. His recent work has focused on the development of NEESgrid , the collaboratory component of the George E. Brown, Jr. Network for Earthquake Engineering Simulation (NEES). He has also conducted research on the impact of geographic dispersion and computer-mediated communication on trust and performance in virtual teams.

Geoffrey C. Bowker is Executive Director of the Center for Science, Technology and Society, Santa Clara University. His main research interests are in the field of classification and standardization: in particular asking how these play into the development of scientific cyberinfrastructure. His recent book Memory Practices in the Sciences looks at information infrastructures and storytelling in a science over the past two hundred years. It looks at geology in the 1830s, cybernetics in the 1950s and environmental sciences today - weaving together their information infrastructure and the stories that they tell about their objects. His work on information infrastructure involves looking at shifting classification systems in medicine, distributed collaborative work practices in environmental science, data sharing practices and biodiversity informatics. My central analytic question here is how scientists in the various sciences contributing to the subject of biodiversity communicate both with each other and with policymakers - and in particular how do the data structures and practices in use affect this communication.

Christine L. Borgman is Professor & Presidential Chair in Information Studies, UCLA.

Christine studies the creation, use, and management of scientific data and its implications for science policy. This research is associated with the Center for Embedded Networked Sensing and with the CENSEI Project. The goals are to apply knowledge of scientific data practices to the design of data collection and management tools, and to the design and policy of information services for research and Education. Christine's research on scientific data is one of many inputs to her second area of interest, which is analytical work on the changing nature of scholarship in an environment of ubiquitous computer networks and digital information. These threads are combined in her recent book, Scholarship in the Digital Age: Information, Infrastructure, and the Internet.

Karen S. Baker studies, designs, and practices within information environments. A member of UCSD Scripps Institution of Oceanography Integrative Oceanography Division, she is an information manager for the Palmer Station and California Coastal Ecosystem Long-Term Ecological Research sites. Karen is also a member of the Science Studies department at UCSD.