
Addressing Challenges in Doing International Field Research

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Abstract

This panel will discuss some of the key challenges in doing international field research including issues with planning, conducting, interpreting, and reporting on such research. Panelists will also share potential solutions and approaches they have used to try to deal with these challenges, and will discuss with the audience additional challenges that audience members have encountered, offering ideas on how to address these as appropriate.

Keywords

International Field Research, Ethnography, Ethics, Culture, Context, Actionable Research.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

ACM General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Legal Aspects, Management

Introduction

The world is changing. More and more companies recognize the need to be doing international user research at the same time that the economy is putting increasing pressure on their budgets. In this environment, it is more important than ever that international user research be done in as cost-effective

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a way as possible. That said, there are many challenges when doing international user research – especially international field research. These challenges can compromise the validity and ultimately the value of the research if they are not handled proactively and effectively.

Goals for the Panel

This panel will tackle the biggest issues we see facing international field research. Each of the panelists has done significant international field research in multiple countries for many years, and each is well aware of these challenges. They have also devised a variety of ways to deal with the challenges in order to either eliminate the risks or to manage them proactively. The goal for this panel is to raise the awareness and sophistication of the CHI community in dealing with the challenges of doing international field research.

Challenges to be Addressed

Each panelist will discuss a key challenge that they have faced and offer suggestions for how to deal with it. The challenges include:

Planning Studies When You Don't Know What You Don't Know (Yet) (Susan Dray): International user-centered design field research is often exploratory, which often means going into a context with which the researcher may be unfamiliar. This complicates planning for the research, because many planning decisions may seem to hinge on exactly those things that are not yet understood. I will discuss some strategies to deal with these unknowns when planning the research.

Ethics and Privacy (Patrick Larvie): How do we act as ethical researchers across national borders, across languages or across cultures? I will outline some of the hazards I've found as well as ways of mitigating them. I'll also discuss how we can learn from the gray areas of research practice to enrich our understanding of user-centered design.

Cultural Calibration, Quickly (Ame Elliott): Financial constraints and aggressive development timelines often limit time spent on international fieldwork trips, and it can be difficult to justify any time in the field spent outside traditional research activities. Yet international field research also must capture the cultural nuance of a place to better inform design. Researchers can better serve design and identify unmet needs if they are "culturally calibrated." I will discuss several methods for cultural calibration that are effective even in limited amounts of time.

Translating Language and Culture (Elizabeth Churchill): Field research entails the attempt to understand someone else's experience. There are particular challenges when fieldwork is international. The logistical challenges of planning and arranging the research are huge. But once these have been handled and you have arrived, the deeper challenges begin: seeing, understanding what has been seen and explaining/explicating what one has seen. I argue that a translator who becomes part of your team is the best asset you can have in short time-frame field research when they are cultural guides, offering insights into language but also posture, gesture, and custom. They can help us see what is ordinary and what is extraordinary in a place where perhaps all appears extraordinary to us as "foreigners." I will discuss

specific ways translators can be these cultural guides, and will touch on how to incorporate them on a team.

Panel Format

The panel will follow the following plan:

[1] INTRODUCTIONS OF PANELISTS (3 MINUTES) (David Siegel as Moderator)

[2] BACKGROUND: WHAT MAKES INTERNATIONAL FIELD RESEARCH PARTICULARLY CHALLENGING (5 MINUTES): Brief discussion of the challenges/issues to be discussed (high level) (David Siegel)

[3] DISCUSSION OF INSIGHTS (40 MINUTES): Each panelist will elaborate on one key challenge (see above) covering why we should focus attention on this issue, how is it typically addressed and what are the limitations of these approaches, and what new ways or alternatives make more sense to deal with this challenge. (10 minutes each)

[4] FACILITATED AUDIENCE DISCUSSION (40 MINUTES EACH): Our goal is to spend as much time as possible in discussions with the audience. For this, we plan to have one panelist engage with each question to limit panel monopolizing of the time so that the audience is empowered to participate.

[6] SUMMARY AND WRAP-UP (2 MINUTES): The moderator will sum up the conclusions of the panel.

Panelists' Backgrounds

Elizabeth Churchill is a Principal Research Scientist at Yahoo! Research in Santa Clara, CA. where she manages the Internet Experiences research group.

Elizabeth has an undergraduate degree in Experimental Psychology and an MSc in Knowledge Based Systems, both from University of Sussex in the UK, and a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge in Cognitive Science. Elizabeth has conducted observational and participant field-based research in digital, physical and hybrid places – that is, in chat spaces, text-based and graphical virtual worlds, augmented reality environments and in cafes, workplaces, homes, railway stations and – within the bounds of propriety – anywhere that people go. To date, Elizabeth has conducted fieldwork in the UK, mainland Europe, the United States and Japan.

Susan Dray heads Dray & Associates, Inc. and has worked as a leader in the field of HCI since its infancy 30 years ago. She has taught, presented, and consulted on every continent except Antarctica, and has published widely as well. Much of her work has included field research. She also has done many user research projects aimed at developing appropriate technology for the so-called “developing world” and has helped to build the HCI4D professional community. She was elected a Fellow of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society and has chaired two of its technical groups: Organizational Design and Management, and Computer Systems Technical Group as well as the Computers and Communications Scientific and Technical Committee of the International Ergonomics Association (IEA). Susan was the North American editor of *Behaviour and Information Technology* and the editor of the Business column in *<interactions>*. She now is the Director of Publications for UPA. She has a doctorate in Psychology from UCLA and is a Board-Certified User Experience Professional (CUXP). In 2009, Susan was named an ACM Distinguished Engineer.

Ame Elliott is a Senior Human Factors Specialist and Project Lead at IDEO in Palo Alto, CA. She has done fieldwork in India on access to drinking water by the poor; researched the technology needs of Vietnamese entrepreneurs in the manufacturing and service industries; led a comparative study of the global home PC experience in China, Japan, the United States, Germany and Italy; and conducted fieldwork in Japan in support of business collaboration tools and leisure guides for young people. She has a Ph.D. in Architecture from the University of California, Berkeley, and a Bachelor of Environmental Design from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Prior to joining IDEO, Ame was a research scientist at the Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) and at Ricoh Innovations.

Patrick Larvie is a veteran researcher, manager and advocate for user centered design with a career spanning 15 years and experience leading design initiatives on every continent but Antarctica. Patrick was trained as an anthropologist at the University of Chicago, where he earned his Ph.D., and has gone on

to lead user-centered research and product design in academic and not-for-profit sectors as well as in Silicon Valley's leading technology companies. After five years of leading Yahoo!'s international user research efforts, Patrick is now the manager of Google's world-wide user research team.

David Siegel (Moderator) is a consultant with Dray & Associates, who has a strong background in research methodology and psychology. He has been doing contextual field research, both domestic and international, as well as other types of projects with Dray & Associates since 1993. He has published and taught on a variety of user-centered design (UCD) topics including planning, conducting and making sense of international field research. Prior to his UCD work, David worked as a manager and consultant in health care. He received his B.A. from Princeton University and his Ph.D., in Psychology from UCLA. He brings to his current projects his background in assessment and measurement of cognitive and affective processes as well as research methodology.