

Towards a Postcolonial Information Studies

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this roundtable is to explore and discuss the theoretical and research possibilities for the iSchools, and broadly, Information Studies as a discipline, to adopt perspectives from postcolonial studies. The roundtable presents examples of research currently being conducted across diverse interests and domains within Information Studies in attempt to facilitate discussion around these possibilities.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

General Terms

Documentation, Performance, Design, Economics,
Experimentation, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords

Postcoloniality, archival theory, design, information and cultural translations, perspectives on globalization.

1. INTRODUCTION

This panel will present several research efforts that sit at the intellectual convergence of postcolonial studies and information studies. Post-colonial studies provide a theoretical leveraging ground from which to consider themes of hybridity, multiplicity, globalization, transnationality, and alterity in relation to power and informational phenomena. From this view, efforts to bring together post-colonial perspectives to information studies encourage us to examine the historically contingent processes of the design, implementation, and use of information in global and multi-cultural contexts. As such, a post-colonial perspective can provide a lens from which to look at the way information and its artefacts travel and the implications for such migrations.

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However, these efforts are still nascent. This panel will be a collective opportunity to discuss the possible contours and boundaries of such an intellectual endeavor. As such, the panel will discuss some of the following questions:

- How can/should postcolonial approaches to information studies be defined? What are the diverse concepts that are being worked with?
- What is the relevance of postcolonial approach to information studies? For the iSchools?
- What would and could a post-colonial information studies look like? For the iSchools?
- What are the theoretical assumptions, opportunities, and limitations of a postcolonial information studies approach?
- What kinds of new research questions can be explored within a postcolonial information studies framework?
- What kinds of new locations and sites of inquiry emerge within this framework?
- What ethics and values guide a post-colonial information studies approach?

2. REBECCA DEAN: "ARCHIVING RESISTANCE: FEMINISMS AND POSTCOLONIALITY"

This paper articulates the value of postcolonial theory in information studies research that engages diasporic communities in the United States. Postcolonial studies offers a close analysis of power that can be utilized by information scholars who seek to understand how power is manifested and reproduced in information paradigms such as those in archival practice. In light of these aims the paper examines the specific project of archiving Filipina American women's social movements, which is one example of diasporic, transnational, postcolonial, third world, and feminist political resistance. Postcolonial theory aids in the necessary reflexive examination of the scholar or archivist's relationship to the community and materials she collects, describes, and makes accessible about diasporic communities. Finally this paper forms recommendations for meaningful intellectual engagement with the existing project of Third World feminist and subaltern cultural studies to recover neglected cultural texts and forms of political resistance through an archival practice informed by feminist and postcolonial theory.

3. LILLY IRANI: “THE POLITICS OF TOURISM AND TRANSLATION IN DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnographic practices of information technology design, both in industry and academia, have transformed over the course of 20 years of practice. Excursions to the field commonly take the form of brief, inspirational engagements rather than the multi-year anthropological fieldwork that inspired the methods. Researchers typically go to the field for a week to learn to walk in a user’s shoes, or even lead one day tours meant to inspire corporate executives to change course. Increasingly, tropes of tourism structure the way design ethnography is being understood and practiced. The tour inspires innovative authorship when properly guided by the tour guide user researcher. Through a close reading of design ethnography texts, coupled with analysis of recent developments in design research, I argue that recognizing touristic activity in design research helps us recognize the politics and limits of knowledge making and technological practices in their current manifestations.

4. ANDREW J. LAU: “EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY: CULTURAL NARRATIVITY, TRANSMIGRATION, AND ‘RECORDS’”

Archives, as institutions that aim to preserve cultural memory and make it accessible, are by their nature sites of power. That is, the degree to which records represent particular communities is marred by the question of who the creators of the records are, in conjunction with the techniques, mechanisms, and practices that make those records available and usable. Within the context of a postcolonial theory framework, expressions of power within the archive are, for example, manifest in the ideological undercurrents of the contents of records, and the diversity of ontological and epistemological assumptions about the very definition of what constitutes a "record." Adopting ideas from literary and art theory, the current project proposes that these various artifacts and traces can be explored as "texts" on multiple levels, from reading the artifacts themselves to the ways they are ultimately described for access. This presentation will present a rhetorical analysis of an Internet resource organized by the National Archives of the UK. The resource provides a multimedia avenue for immigrants living in the UK to describe their migration experiences in the form of personal testimonies and narratives. The goal of the rhetorical analysis was to explore ideas of subjectivity, cultural identity and imagination, framed in the context of a virtual "archive," and the manners in which immigrants communicate their experiences. Thus, the broad aims of the current project were to elucidate psychodynamic themes of the ways that immigrants remember themselves, construct identity, and communicate those experiences in a space of memory.

5. LILLY NGUYEN: “OPEN IMAGINARIES: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN GLOBAL TRANSITION”

In Western contexts, the discourses surrounding digital technologies have inadvertently coupled notions of openness and transparency with information communication technologies. Digital technologies and their discourses put

forth normative assumptions that often drive the ways in which information communication technologies are conceived, designed, implemented, and translated into locations beyond their origins. These perspectives are often predicated on the view of digital technologies as direct vehicles for increasing openness, transparency, knowledge exchange, and economic growth. However, the relationship between these values and technology is not inherent, but predicated on a kind of discursive labor. The notion of discursive labor is used here to underscore the convergence of technology, openness, and global economic development as a particular configuration from which digital technologies are being “black boxed” as they move into new locales. This presentation will take a closer look at this discursive labor through a comparison of the discourses of openness in economic development and digital technological innovation, particularly in the context of Viet Nam. Overall, this presentation will provide a critique of the assumed relationships between openness, digital technology, and global economic development while also attempting to foster discussion of new ways of looking at digital technologies in multiple and migratory contexts.

6. LILADHAR PENDSE: “‘DECOLONIZING’ COLONIAL PERIODICALS: PRESERVING OR DESTROYING THE INFORMATION PAST?”

The periodical publications of the Colonial era represent a wealth of information for researchers in several disciplines. The information that is contained within such publications sheds light on day-to-day happenings, including the multitude of information transactions that took place within different colonial enclaves. These periodicals were often considered ephemeral and the decolonization policies within newly independent states have led to further marginalization of these colonial era artifacts. These periodicals are often susceptible to the effects of humidity, high temperatures, and detrimental storage conditions in the archives of these colonial enclaves throughout the developing world. The lack of uniform policy governing preservation of these periodicals has become a complicated issue of late. There are several reasons for this lack of agreement on how to digitally preserve these periodicals. These reasons cannot be solely attributed to the limitations of the information infrastructure of these archival institutions or to the unwillingness of these institutions to implement various digital preservation related guidelines. On one hand, many of these periodicals do belong in the public domain; on the other, the definition of “public domain” varies across various nation-states. Specifically, the governmental periodical publications of the colonial era in the developing world create a “legal nightmare”. The colonial governments that used to administer these territories through various arrangements are now defunct; however the governments of the mother countries still exist. The process of incorporating these colonial enclaves in to the independent nation states further complicates the matter. As a policy case study, my paper will analyze the case of French India and the impediments faced by archives and libraries that want to preserve the colonial era periodicals of French India. I would examine legal aspects of French intellectual property right code and the intellectual property right interpretations and mechanisms within the Republic of India.

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