

# Digital Ethnography in the Library: A Routledge FreeBook from the *In The Library* Series

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## RESOURCE REVIEW

Book review of

*Digital ethnography in the library.* (n.d.). Routledge.  
<https://librarianresources.taylorandfrancis.com/insights/library-management/digital-ethnography-library/>

The first chapter of this Routledge FreeBook opens with a question addressed to librarians: “How much time do you spend in the library?” (Ramsden, n.d., p. 6). A reflection on the amount of time librarians actually spent in areas that visitors use gives the reader a glimpse at how much information and context is lacking from survey answers, patron complaint/suggestion forms, and the odd inspections now and then. It begs the question: how do we add context to these numerical values?

Ethnographic methods are an excellent way to get more in-depth and timely qualitative data to support quantitative data that represents library use. Ethnography is a term usually associated with qualitative research but not often connected to library work. While the term may seem intimidating to librarians, this book reminds us that ethnography is primarily concerned with learning about cultures. Bryony Ramsden (n.d.) argues:

*Library users are a culture and have specific identities that can inform on their usage patterns (and in turn cycle back to inform the culture’s identities), and thus show us how each culture responds to the library’s policies, designs, resources or anything else we as library staff might provide. (p. 7)*

### **Ethnography ... in the Library?**

The first chapter succinctly discusses the different ethnographic methods that have been successfully integrated in the libraries mentioned as examples, such as: 1) interviews; 2) cognitive mapping; and 3) focus groups. This discussion is followed by critical points to consider when working with both qualitative and quantitative data in the context of library relationships. It is imperative for library practitioners to “look beyond the numbers to seek out the information that usually matters the most to the people using our libraries—what happens when they are in our buildings using them” (Ramsden, n.d., p. 17).

Applying ethnographic methods to library activities also calls for embracing an ethnographic agenda. It constitutes a collaborative environment with the network that libraries work with, a culture of asking questions, and an emphasis on usability which in turn gives libraries a voice to be heard, a seat at the table, and resources for the community (Lanclos, n.d.). Lanclos (n.d.) further illustrates that “if patrons cannot figure out how to navigate EBSCO, it does not matter how much libraries have paid for access to the peer-reviewed articles in those databases; the articles will not be used” (p. 27).

With library services and resources, especially in university and research libraries, becoming mainly available online it has also become more important for librarians to navigate teaching to access in the digital environment. Ethnographic methods play a more important role in contextualizing library use in the digital landscape as we teach media information literacy skills and provide access to resources like e-

books and virtual research environments (VREs) that necessitate minimal intervention. DaCosta (n.d.) explains that “librarians need to look at ways in which their web pages and library catalogues can be simplified. If instructions are needed on how to search the OPAC then the battle is already lost” (p. 54). Library spaces need to be intuitive for users to navigate so as not to discourage use. Kline and Williams (n.d.) has a similar view:

*When the user tries to access an electronic resource and it does not work, the user assumes the resource to be at fault and never digs deeply enough to re- solve the problems and give the resource another chance to prove its wealth. (p. 109)*

Furthermore, librarians are advised to avoid falling into the trap of “thinking that they know what their users want without actually doing the research” (DaCosta., n.d., p. 55) that goes beyond circulation and visitor numbers. Readers are reminded that “librarians are collaborators on the creation teams with a positive role to play, brokering the information by participating in and facilitating the conversation among creators and users” (Soules., n.d., p. 96). We embrace that libraries are now spaces of conversation where “technology and content merge” (Soules, n.d., p. 97) and library practitioners facilitate conversations 1) between users and the information, 2) among users and information, and 3) among users about information.

### **Free Resources ... Are the Best Resources?**

The *In The Library FreeBook* series was created to provide library practitioners and students of library and information science (LIS) with a discussion on traditional usability (UX) work as a subset of ethnographic practices, eliciting data on user behavior, and providing a road to transforming institutional practices through anthropological insights (“Digital ethnography in the library”, n.d.).

The open access format of the titles in the series makes these copies the most accessible to library practitioners in the Philippines who may be interested in the topic. While the chapters in each FreeBook are only excerpts from chapters in references worth thousands of pesos each, the contents have been meticulously chosen to be helpful enough in starting off ethnography-based decisions in libraries who have yet to do so. The chapters work well together to introduce the concept of

ethnography and digital ethnography in studying library use.

Introducing and acknowledging the existence of a library culture of patrons (instead of only librarians or library practitioners) to readers early in the chapters fosters an environment of collaboration between library staff and users. The simple act of thinking that our library users are made of different cultures and subcultures of students, parents, teachers, and staff enables us to take strides in putting their different needs and experiences into context such as user engagement with “quiet” library behavior (Lanclos, n.d.) as we decide and update library policies.

Emphasizing the benefits of applying ethnographic methods to make sense of user experience in the library beyond numerical data can save libraries (and universities) valuable time and financial resources. This involvement of ethnographic methods and processes in library administration can lead to rethinking priorities and factors in decision-making. Library practitioners can focus on making library resources as easily accessible to library users who need them instead of succumbing to the petrified state of thinking that in doing so, librarians are “risking de-centering our expertise” (Lanclos, n.d., p. 27). On the contrary, Lanclos (n.d.) posits that “library resources and the people who work within the library are made visible when attention is paid to the ways that people already search, the cues that they are looking for, and the conventions of the open web” (p. 23).

To further highlight the importance of accessibility, the chapters are in an easy-to-read Sans Serif font with comfortable line spacing. As a graduate student who has recently returned to academia years after graduation, I found the terminologies used to be helpfully accessible which librarians who have been out of the academe for some time would appreciate as well.

### **Potential for Ethnography in Philippine Libraries**

As the contributors are all library administrators practicing ethnographic methods in their libraries, the examples detailed in the chapters are mostly from their first-hand experiences. The in-depth examples are excellent windows into how libraries and their users’ interactions have progressed. On the other hand, since all of the contributors are from academic libraries, experiences were drawn from, and goals were set for academic libraries in large universities. From a K-4 school librarian’s perspective, while most

of these experiences and goals do not directly align with our library users' needs, the fundamentals are the same with minor changes to represent the community we serve. Similarly, as all of the contributors are from university libraries in the UK and the US, examples and assumptions were of a Western perspective. While most library systems in the Philippines have deep roots in US library systems, the technology we use and the community we work with have evolved in different ways and at different paces.

As the chapters are excerpts from referenced works, the discussions may seem to lack depth for those wanting to look past an introduction to the methods. The referenced works were published between 2008 and 2016. While the core principles remain, modern examples that go beyond e-books and the early days of VREs would serve the readers better especially with newer editions of the reference books available on the market.

An updated version of this FreeBook (and hopefully the rest of the *In The Library* series) would ideally feature contributions from more geographically and culturally diverse libraries representative of the global majority. It would be interesting to see how libraries in Southeast Asia or more specifically the Philippines have fared in applying ethnographic methods to their studies of library use which in turn informs their decision-making policies. Alternatively, further research could be done on ethnographic methods in school libraries as well as public libraries since these libraries function differently from academic and research libraries. Their relationships with their parent organizations and users, as well as the different user subcultures, are distinctive of each library type.

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