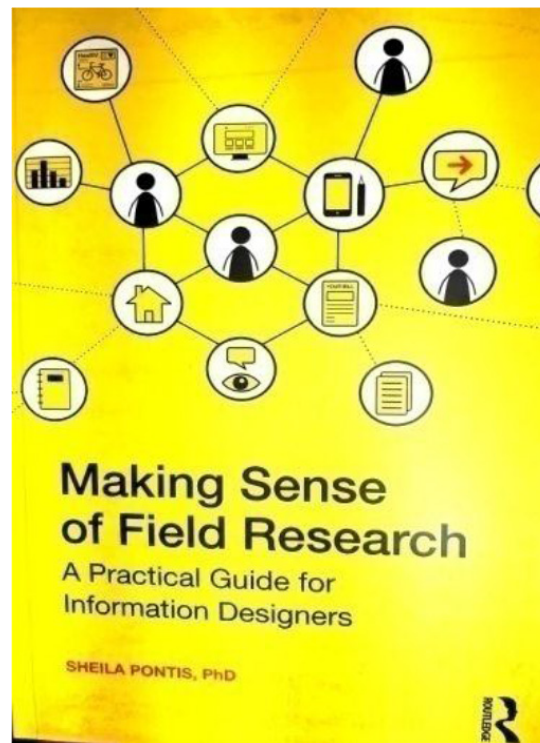


Exploring Links Between Field Research and Information Design



Making Sense of Field Research: A Practical Guide for Information Designers. by Sheila Pontis; Routledge, London, 2018. ISBN: 9780415790024 (hardback), ISBN: 9780415790031 (paperback), ISBN: 9781315213613 (e-book).

Information design is the art of presenting information in a logically compatible way that enables the information-consumers to assimilate the information by their brains. The term 'Information design' is broadly used for a specific area of graphic design related to information display. It is closely related to the field of data visualization and is often taught as part of graphic design courses. It simplifies complex data to cull out understandable information from it for a particular audience. The various domains of applications of information design have created some overlap in the definitions of communication design, data visualization and information architecture.

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According to Pettersson¹, Information design of today has its origin and its roots in: 1) graphic design, 2) education and teaching and 3) architecture and engineering, or rather construction and production. Today information design education ranges from short courses to several years long programs, some even reaching Ph.D level. The discipline is also named communication design, document design and presentation design. In future, it will be quite possible that some universities will introduce very similar design subject matters and use other names. We will have to wait and see. In brief, information design requires expertise from a wide range of disciplines. Successful information design is a collaborative effort of skilled visual designers, writers, editors, illustrators, data visualization experts, human factor specialists and usability specialists.

The Field Research, on the other hand involves qualitative and quantitative methods of collection of mainly factual data in a systematic way for understanding people through interactions when they are in a natural environment. For example, the

observation of society and cultural behaviour of any tribal community in their natural surroundings and the way they react to certain scenarios. Some well-known examples of field research are, participatory observation, survey research, ethnographic research, case studies etc. in contrast to experimental or laboratory-based research. This book is a link between field research and information design. Information, today is an ubiquitous entity, essential for any action, also plays the central role in field research. The systematic collection, organisation and dissemination of information for field researchers are vital for smooth functioning and easy progress of research. This book, an indispensable handbook for field researchers, tells how to design an information system on the eve of initiation of a field research.

The book is presented under four parts with each part addressing a particular aspect of the theme of the book. The four parts are covered by eleven chapters. The Part I is introductory consisting of three chapters. The Part II, is covered by four chapters (chapter 4 to 8), describes different components and ways to conduct field research. The Chapter 6 and 7 of part II analytically discussed the information designing steps in connection to field study. The Part III contains three chapters 8 to 10. The chapters deal with various aspects that field research findings must cover to fit in the information system design. The Part IV presents five case studies.

The Part 1 of the book starts with a brief overview of information design. The four essential components of information design, i.e. problem, people, content and context are presented here through schematic diagram. The practical issues of information design is highly subject-specific or domain-specific, which is not indicated in this book. The information-based issues are addressed here in a generalized way that is independent of any subject or discipline. The importance of the information-clientele or audience is emphasized here. It focussed on field research and people-centred insights only for information design concept. The Chapter 2 of Part 1 discussed on the relational aspects between information design and field research. To search for possible reasons of disbeliefs on qualitative research, the author remarked "Paradigm-related biases are the source of misunderstandings and the reason why someone may dismiss the value of one research approach and not another", which seems rather oversimplification. There are so many theoretical facets of paradigm bias. Thomas Kuhn² observed that scientific effort tends to progress in waves or paradigms. Researchers' general tendency to ride the wave of research paradigms is very natural at the time concerned. A new paradigm always signals promise and peril simultaneously. A good research should be driven by the research question and theory at first. Its conflict with paradigm is a matter of latter consequences. The logical

explanation of the cause of conflict needs sound theoretical development. The steps of information design as a component of field research are presented with clarity. The Chapter 3 of Part 1 gives a brief overview of key components of field research. The author identified three components, viz. empathy, interpretation and ambiguity. The five key considerations for field research in information design are discussed and presented in Figures. The features are presented in a generalised way, irrespective of subject domain. The components described here are pertinent for social science research, particularly ethnographic research through participatory observation methods.

The Part 2 gives detailed layout of how to conduct a field study. It starts with the layout of planning and design followed by data collection methods. The justification of the sampling size and sampling strategy, however is not clear. Whether it is based on author's personal experience or any theoretical justification is prevalent in such cases that need explanation. The purposive sampling or snowball sampling are very useful for ethnographic research that is a particular type of field research. The choice of sampling technique, by and large depends on the population size also. Nonprobabilistic sampling technique is discussed here. The ways of making sense of data and assembling the survey team are explained with clarity. The Chapter 5 highlights methods of exploratory studies. The online field research is inadequately covered that is perhaps more significant in today's context. The Chapter 6 presents data gathering methods for evaluative studies. The difference between third and fourth dimensions for assessing information designing performance is not clearly understandable. The fourth dimension may be categorized under the third one, i.e. behavioural changes. The different evaluation types are precisely described. The Chapter 7 highlights the ways for extracting information from field data, i.e. making sense of field data.

The Part 3 presents the ways to communicate findings of the field data, or the dissemination of field data. The Chapter 8 discusses, how the learnings from field data can be informed to information designers for decision-making. The field-stories are the main parts here, which undoubtedly requires strong subjective interpretations beyond any standard framework. How to develop stories pertaining to an event associated with a phenomena in broad sense is discussed here. The information designers less rely on intuition or assumptions, but need evidence gathered from real people about their behavioural pattern for finding effective solutions. The field research, in this aspect is a powerful tool for the information designers. However, by and large, the basic goal of information design is clarity of communication. The Chapter 9 presents techniques to interpret findings into actionable conclusions. The conclusion will be effective if a new design can be developed from the

available field-data. The Chapter 10 summarizes all previous chapters in a nutshell. The five case studies furnished at the end are very helpful for the practical information designers particularly for a new initiation.

The Chapter 11 presented five cases from different information design companies and organizations that executed different field researches as part of their information design process. The first case study is about redesigning of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. The Case Study 2 is about how to make London a highly walkable city by making it easier for people to move around. The Case Study 3 described the project with objective to make New York City's street-vending rules and regulations clear, understandable accessible to street vendors in the form of a print resource. The Case Study 4 is about to create ways to help reduce violence and aggression towards NHs staff in Accident and Emergency (A & E) departments across the UK. The Case Study 5 is about to create a street parking sign that helped drivers to better understand parking rules and determine

whether and for how long they could park in a specific parking spot. All case studies are uniquely presented and analysed.

The book contains 88 Figures in total that is the special asset of it and makes the book picturesquely fathomable to the readers. The list of references at the end provides serious readers further useful sources. This book is an effective handbook for a researcher doing field study and wants to develop an information system based on his work. Actually it is a guidebook consisting of practical instructions for planning, designing and conducting a field study. The illustrations and five real-world case studies are key features of this book. The possible practical links between information design and field research are highlighted here necessitating its importance equivalent to an instruction manual or an interactive data visualization. However, the subject-specific interpretations of information design problems are not covered here that may perhaps be continued in next projects.

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