What Can I Say? (Or, "Île Sans Fil are Thieves and Liars"*): Stories from the Heart of Participatory Research

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Wi: Journal of Mobile Media, *Winter/Spring 2007*

The online version of this article can be found at:

https://doi.org/10.65968/KFWN8493

Powell, Alison, "What Can I Say? (Or, "Île Sans Fil are Thieves and Liars"*): Stories from the Heart of Participatory Research". *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media. Winter/Spring* (2007). Web.
https://doi.org/10.65968/KFWN8493

What Can I Say?
(Or, "Île Sans Fil are Thieves and Liars"[1])

Stories from the heart of participatory research

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Montreal, Friday night, end of October, 2006

In a café on St-Laurent I cup a mug of tea and wind my scarf against the cold. Michael from Île Sans Fil (or ISF) and I are meeting to discuss a writing project for this journal, and I am trying to find a new angle on a story I've lived in for two years. The last thing I want to do is to write another case study of "Canada's most successful community wireless network." I'm no longer inspired to write about innovative business models that encourage local businesses to share their internet bandwidth. I have already written about the sociology of volunteer groups that define their political engagement through technology. While I feel that ISF's use of Wi-Fi hotspots to create new media distribution sites, and their work with artists creates sites of cultural exchange is interesting, I don't only want to tell that story. I have piles of field notes that tell the story of the relationships at the heart of my research. I haven't written about

them, but I want to begin to tell those stories, as difficult and confusing as they may be.

For a long time I have been doing what the methods books call "participant observation" – meeting, interviewing, traveling with, arguing, drinking beer with, misunderstanding, and becoming friends with members of ISF. After all these experiences I don't know what else to say. Part of me wants to leave it behind, to drink my tea and read books as I think PhD students are supposed to do.

"Mike" I say, "I'm tired. I don't want to write any more cheerful case studies."

"Then don't," he says, stirring his coffee. "Write about your adventures with us. Tell some stories. You don't have to be cheerful. Heck, call the piece "Ile Sans Fil are thieves and liars!"

"Oh, I can't say that," I say. Then I pause. "Can I really say that!?" And I laugh.

Île Sans Fil are not, as far as I can tell, thieves and liars. I, on the other hand, might be considered a liar, since pulling any narrative out of one's field notes means combining, eliding, and possibly amplifying actual events. However, acknowledging the part I've played in telling the story is one of the insights on participatory methodology I've accumulated over two years of ethnographic fieldwork with a community technology organization. This is why I do this, why I have done it all along. Because participatory research means so much more than reading books alone in the library (although I do that a lot too). It means knowing people, and trusting

them. Living bad days, disagreements, ambiguity and frustration. Refusing to take everything seriously. Learning things one could not have imagined. Going away . . . and coming back. I think back two years, to when all of this began, and I begin to see the threads of a story.

Montreal, Wednesday night, mid-August 2004

Climbing up the stairs to Café Utopik, the rambling second-floor co-op café where plants grow across the ceiling and organic food is served, the first thing I see through the door are beer taps. I'm here to meet with a community group, the one that I hope will be a case study for a research project on community networking and innovation, and maybe a project I can use for the PhD I am about to start. Back in Toronto, Michael had told me about this group and its project of creating electronic "third places" in Montreal. After having investigated internet cafés for a couple of years, I figured it would be easy to theorize WiFi hotspots. I'll get the community group to give me access to their locations, and I'll work on understanding what people are doing at them. Maybe I can even do a bit of "participatory" research along the way.

At the top of the stairs, I have to poke around a bit to find Michael, surrounded by five other young men and several pitchers of beer. He says, "Hi, Alison" and then gets back to the conversation he was having. Someone offers me a beer, and I tentatively perch on the edge of a chair. A guy wearing a black shirt with some computer code written on it is passionately discussing something to do with "flashing the box". Another guy is staring at a laptop screen and chatting over his shoulder to his friend, who is holding a beer. I take out my notebook and try to take notes, but soon everyone is looking

at me. I understand: they all have laptops covered with stickers sitting in front of them. I don't quite understand – I was expecting a meeting, a call to order, a procedure. Instead, people keep chatting with one another until finally a kind of inertial moment arrives. "Ok! Let's start! So, we have an issue with the server. We can't keep manually authenticating. We need a new kind of auth server. Benoit and Francois have been working on one. They called it WiFiDog. Oh, and by the way, this is Alison. She's come to study us. You know, poke us with sticks and see what we do."

Everyone laughs, and I laugh too. I introduce myself, and try to explain that I have come to work with them. They listen politely, and then continue the meeting. I take careful notes in my notebook, but when I read them later I feel as if I have missed the point. I have an intuition that what ISF is doing is important, but I don't understand. I was expecting to use my critical and cultural perspectives on technology to work with these volunteers to help them in their project, but it's clear now that working with is not an option. I don't know what anyone is talking about, and I'm wondering if I made the right choice. I thought I understood Wi-Fi technology, so why is what happened at the meeting so strange? Why didn't I choose to do participatory research about something I understood?

Montreal, Thursday morning, February 2005

I am sending emails to the ISF intern, who I volunteered to supervise as he worked on a project documenting regulations for mounting external Wi-Fi antennae on heritage buildings. This would help to expand the ISF network, especially over some parkland. His work is not going well, and I am teaching, and writing, and submitting papers to conferences talking about how wonderful community networking projects are. Since I stumbled up the stairs in August, I have been

determined to find a way to use my skills to help ISF. I have been attending meetings regularly, and interviewing the founding members of the network. I am learning about Wi-Fi, but I am also beginning to feel a part of something. I read the ISF mailing list every day, and through interviews have come to know some key ISF members better. I truly want their – our – project to work, and I want to contribute to it as much as possible.

But still, I am overworked, and I don't feel that ISF is quite sure what to do with an intern. Furthermore, I am not convinced that the information he is gathering will be useful for most ISF members. Maybe someone else should have done the supervision. Shouldn't I be doing research "fieldwork" instead of supervision of another volunteer? Is this really what participatory research is about? How much work is too much?

Montreal, Friday night, June 2005

"I think it's sexist! What do we have to do to get taken seriously by these guys?"

My friend and co-ISFer is angry. She has just read an email posted to the group's public list that she thinks makes it sound as if the female ISF members should perform sexual favours as a means of promoting the group. She and I, and two other of the "filles sans fil" – the only women involved in ISF – are spending the evening together. We have been telling "stories from the trenches" about being women who work with technology. Two of the "filles" are web developers. Then there's me, and a new media artist. We tend to characterize ourselves as "non-techy" but aside from me, the other women have strong technical skills combined with "soft" skills like

writing, designing, and coordinating projects. We were all working for our skills to be taken seriously by the other ISF volunteers, but this mail feels like a major step back. One of my friends has been trying to propose a new user interface to the group, but no one will respond to her emails, and she is tired of trying to yell louder than everyone else in the meetings. Another one feels personally marginalized because of her gender. A third is adamant that this issue should not be blown out of proportion, but is still frustrated. Personally, I am furious that my, our, many hours of invisible work, our presence at meetings, our insistence on equitable speech rules, our promotion of the ISF project have all been reduced to a stereotyped gender role. Sometimes we feel that ISF is like a locker room, where boys build their social networks, and where sexual humour would be just fine, except that there are girls around. Our difference is problematic, and we, this night, are furious that it is so.

The next day, the poster apologizes. But I am still angry. I don't do any work on ISF for four months. When I return, I no longer want to take the position of the "average volunteer" in the organization. If I am different, I will work with my difference. I am a woman, and I am doing research. If that sets me apart, so be it.

London, UK, Saturday morning, September 2005

I am presenting my thesis proposal to my classmates. I've included a case study on ISF, where I'm analyzing the relationship between the discourses and the practices of "community." It seems to me that technical development can be very narrow, and that civic engagement based on technical development might be an élite phenomenon. After all, it mostly seems to be well-educated men

who participate in community wireless networks. Yet they explicitly use the term "community." What does this indicate, I ask, rhetorically. I still don't know how to make sense of this. A classmate asks me about how I reconcile my feminism with working in such a masculine environment. I tell her that it is difficult, but I don't mention my anger and fear, nor the difficult negotiations I had with myself and with my ISF colleagues when I returned to an active research role. After the seminar I think of the result of these negotiations, and I remember that despite all its difficulties, there is great power in partial perspective.

Paris, Saturday afternoon, July 2006

On Saturdays, I can't get access to the office in the National Telecommunications University that I share with other interns and visiting researchers. In France, I have discovered since I arrived a few months ago, people don't work on the weekend. But I am working, enjoying the air conditioning of the school's deserted main lobby, and removing my brain from the day-to-day tension between anarchy and strict control that seems sometimes to characterize Paris. I was invited here to work on a project about community Wi-Fi. Before I left I spent they day with some ISF colleagues installing routers. I told them I was nervous to go, since I still don't understand much about Wi-Fi, especially not the European context. They said, "Well, you taught us some things about what ISF is doing, so I'm sure you can learn."

Hidden away in Paris, where the subtle but important differences I sense as an outsider prevent me from developing a clear perspective, I am writing about ISF. From here in the lounge,

thousands of miles away I can see it more clearly: I see how Montreal's culture has connected the open-source software world with the world of community media. I see how innovation has grown from encounters of different kinds of people, fascinated by the same things used in different ways. I see the trajectory that I was part of, and I wonder where we are going.

Berlin, Saturday night, mid-September 2006

I am lying on a picnic bench in a parking lot, across the street from the old Nazi airport. I am at the Wizards of OS open-source conference, where Yochai Benkler argues that the world is being changed by small groups of people working together on distributed projects. At the table next to me, wireless network developers from three countries are discussing ways to connect different devices to their networks. Benoit from ISF is fielding questions about the WiFiDog software he helped to build – the software that now diffuses different kinds of artistic content, introducing everyone who uses free wireless at ISF hotspots to cultural content. As I drift off to sleep the guys are discussing how to build a protocol to manage different kinds of data so that more networks might act as media. Around the table people make jokes, ask questions, drink beer, and play with their computers. I try to listen to the conversation, try to make sense of the global scale of the community wireless phenomenon. The networks are local, and often have vastly different forms, but they all seem to reflect a desire to build technology differently – to reconnect values to technical development. This seems incredibly powerful to me, especially considering the important role played by "invisible" technologies like communication networks. But after a day of conferences, interviews, and trying to understand technical demonstrations, I have no energy left.

Someone asks me, "Are you sleeping?" and already half snoring, I respond, "No, no, I'm working."

Arlington, VA, Friday morning, September 2006

Two weeks later I am sitting in front of a room full of economists in on the opening panel of the Telecommunications Policy Research Conference. I am sitting next to the author of the first critical research on community wireless networking as a socio-technical movement. I look straight ahead, acknowledge the inspiration I have drawn from him, and with my heart fluttering, begin: "Île Sans Fil is a Community Wireless Network in Montréal, Canada. It is one of the world's best-known community wireless networks, and presents a local solution to the problem of contextualizing local space using technology. It also creates an alternative economic model for providing internet signals free of charge to end users, and sets up a community media platform . . . ." In the audience are Washington policy-makers, telecom specialists, and maybe a couple of people who know what community networks are. If I have anything to say to these people, it is because of the community I have worked with for the last two years. Their visions, their dreams, the things that they build – successfully or not – out of code and human relationships. The things we have built, together.

Notes:

1. Île Sans Fil are not, as far as I can tell, anything like thieves and liars. I on the other hand, might be considered a liar, since this reflection includes some elements that are combinations, elisions, or amplifications of actual events. However, this minor adjustment of chronology does not take away from what I feel are the essential insights on participatory methodology provided by over two years of ethnographic fieldwork with a community technology organization.

People whose voices inspired this text:

Alexis Cornellier, Benoit Grégoire, Will Hall, Michelle Kaspzrak, Michael Lenczner, François Proulx, Leslie Regan Shade, Jeff Schallenberg, Miriam Verburg, and Maya Wiseman.

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Biography

Alison Powell is a PhD candidate in the Communication Studies department at Concordia University in Montreal. Her work focuses on the design, governance, and regulation of alternative or experimental wireless communication networks. It also explores policy issues related to the development of emerging communication technologies. She is a member of the Canadian Research Alliance on Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN).