Interview with Matt Ratto

Prof. Matt Ratto teaches in the area of critical information studies at the Faculty of Information. He researches specific technologies as sites where materiality, pragmatic work, and discursive practices come together to influence the development of communities, disciplines, and other social groups. Matt received his Ph.D. from the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego and has worked at the Virtual Knowledge Studio for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Science and at the HUMIlab in Umea, Sweden.

Bill Mann: ... one major concern of libraries themselves going into the field of Information is that it makes them rethink everything. They are use to these institutional boundaries ~bricks and mortar~ a kind of self-containment over the past hundred years. Yet is also the case that there has always been a social agenda, freedom of access and things like that, and it is interesting that librarians don’t seem to want to take up the challenge of information in a new environment.

Matt Ratto: I think it’s a very tricky ground right now. There are a lot of people who are in information, the whole iSchool movement for instance, and definitely those that still call themselves library or call themselves information science, they are all struggling with their mandate. This has been fairly clear for a long time and the question is do you broaden your mandate in terms of identity? of a librarian, in terms of what they do: as library, as an institution in public society; and as an educational institution, do you broaden your mandate to include more? or do you narrow your focus and go with your historical strengths? That is the kind of balancing act that one see enacted in every library, every library school, and every librarian in terms of their personal identity.

Now that is only one of the many balancing acts. But I do think the thing that worries me, or that makes me nervous, is when someone is negotiating that balancing act and is not thinking about social justice, issues of democracy, issues of autonomy - personal autonomy and cultural autonomy. Those kinds of social issues I think are the real heritage of a library understanding. I think that is where we can make those decisions, that is the resource for making a decision about broadening or narrowing. Does it make society better? does it not? what purpose are we serving? And I’m not saying that every librarian, every library, every library school needs to make the same choice. They don’t all need to broaden; they don’t all need to narrow; but the way to figure that out is to look at those social values and address them.

BM: That’s interesting, because the one issues that Ken Roberts spoke about in Wednesday’s iTea talk concerned the whole issue of “net neutrality” and I thought this is interesting that the President of CLA was giving a talk here at the iSchool on issues of net neutrality, a key social concern. So when I asked, “what does the CLA think of Toronto renaming itself as an iSchool?” Ken’s response was that they just had a big meeting in Ottawa, 117 librarians, including several research librarians, and many of them expressed concerned with the Faculty of Information dropping an aspect of its name. My follow-up question was, “wouldn’t the research that is done at a Faculty like this help inform the decision-making and the policies the CLA would want to . . .
MR: adopt, propagate, etc.

BM: Exactly. It seems there would be a hand and glove relationship here.

MR: I think that is a very typical response and I think it comes from a lack of surety of what the role of the library is. People are genuinely concerned about that – funding getting cut, all these kinds of things. So you could see the dropping of library from the Faulty of Information name as, “oh, we don’t think libraries are as important anymore.” That’s one way to see it. The other way to see it is that the historical mandate of libraries is incredibly important and now we need to broaden it out to other types of cultural heritage institutions and other types of activities; other types of practices that involve information because in some ways ~ and maybe this is overstating it ~ crises around information are the determining feature of what is happening in society these days. And all of the issues that we typically ascribe to things that we think about in a library context: cultural and historical memory, absolutely important; access to that, incredibly important; the skills necessary to make sense of it, incredibly important. We see that enacted over and over again in terms of, to make one example, economic crises in society.

We had the huge Enron scandal and a lot of that came down to the fact – it wasn’t just that people were making bad decisions - that there wasn’t accountability. And there wasn’t accountability because there was no way to deal with the huge masses of information that were coming out of that organization, especially those in regards to derivatives trading. First off, there was no good way of organizing it, dealing with it and addressing it in a coherent way. Secondly, there was no way of sense-making in regard to it. These are absolutely essential tasks and the only place you will learn these tasks is in an Information school.

BM: Let me ask you in terms of being brand new faculty here; I’m not sure what your background in library is?

MR: Zero in terms of the discipline, but lots of shared values I hope.

BM: so now you land in a school that is just transitioning from being Information Studies to being a Faculty of Information, this broader more encompassing vision, how do you make bridges back into the curriculum that has been this historic framework while also taking the incoming students into the more expansive field of information?

MR: Well, I’m still figuring a lot of that stuff out and I am some days quite overwhelmed with these same issues that we have just been talking about: how do I provide value to this context? how do I help that process? I think the danger is to let myself be confined to a single area of the faculty, to focus only on information systems, or only on critical information studies, and fail to address the faculty as a whole.

I think that one of the things that is happening with all the curriculum change we’ve been working on (here at the Faculty of Information) is an attempt to stop silo-ization. What often happens is that faculties become departmentalized, so there is the department of information
There is the department of libraries, the department of archives. This is the thing we are really trying to resist and rightfully so I think, because the commonality between these areas is greater than the difference. And to departmentalize and create these barriers is to lose this commonality. Our position was well articulated by Brian (Cantwell Smith) in the ‘Stepping up’ document. It was a different way of knowing; it was a synthetic way of knowing.

Personally, to get back to your question, the way I’m going to try to do it – and this connects up to some of my very recent thinking about the Critical Making Lab, critical-making as a methodology or mode of engagement that I think is important – is to look at these common social values – autonomy, democracy, disclosure, social justice – to look where these things are articulated, either implicitly or explicitly, in writing and position statements in a variety of areas, particularly information studies as a kind of nascent and growing discipline, but also historically in library scholarship, in the kind of scholarship that came out of library and information science. I believe an interest in social values as an intrinsic part of information practices is the primary point of contact between areas of the faculty. What we need to do now is make that explicit. Doing so will remind all of us that there is a shared agenda. Then what is important is not just the institution which students are learning skills for – the library, the corporation, the non-profit, government – but what institutions stand for, which are these broader social tropes. It’s about skills and perspective.

BM: That most have been a helpful discovery, a nice framing for your work.

MR: It was because what I think is necessary is a critical agenda in the sense of the old Frankfort school of criticality. Not the literary tradition, not just that, but a reworking and a repurposing of a Marxist understanding of historical materialism: particular ways of thinking about a society. And this comes out of a society that was at that point dealing with incredible problems. It comes out of the Holocaust. And the notion of criticality to them was that social scientists couldn’t just study society, they had to intervene in society. To be critical means to reflect on society and effect it. I have been struggling how to frame that, to build some structure to that. I have realized that these social values were actually being very well articulated and very thoroughly articulated in the values ascribed to libraries and museums as cultural institutions, and in the political economy of information literature in regards to policy on information, but that these values were less clear and less articulated within the more technical work of information systems. What I realized was there was a language being created in the above areas and that we could use those same kind of issues being pulled out as a way to think about how the information technologies in context, through design, in practice, maintain or subvert those values. This is the point of contact between libraries, archives, museums, critical studies of media and information. And this is what I want to explore in the critical making lab.