

ENGL 300: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Googleography Assignment: Due Tuesday 25th September

"You are your data" (Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly)

Your first assignment is to construct a biography of your life (or some aspect of your life) using information about yourself gleaned online.

Google yourself. Start with information you already know (your address, family names, everyday habits etc), and see what else comes up. Then extend that knowledge into a meaningful narrative, using the Internet as your "construction tool." For this project, I'm not interested in how the Internet *stores* meaning. I'm interested in how information and tools on the Internet can be used to *create* meaning from raw material.

The purpose of this project is not just to get you to find out things you didn't know. It's to get you to do two things:

- 1) To find out how much of a "trace" people leave in a world of texts. The Internet is an amalgam of different kinds of texts: narratives, databases, visualization tools, and social networks. Even if googling yourself brings up nothing, the kind of life you lead leaves all kinds of information on the web without you even knowing it.
- 2) To find a way to represent this information meaningfully. You might choose a visual representation, or a textual one. But either way I'm looking for a *rich* representation.

Some starting points, to show a range of approaches you could take:

- local.google.com :: find a way to use the map to describe something meaningful about yourself. You could use it to map an average day's driving, for example, or the (physical and cognitive) distances between your home and your work, or something interesting and mathematical using GPS coordinates.
- [OECD factbook](http://OECD.org) :: where do you fit in? What can you find out about yourself from these statistics? How can you represent these facts: tables? Graphs? Macaroni sculptures?
- ancestorphunt.com :: can you find anything about an ancestor online (use any ancestry site you can find)? How can you represent ancestry as a concept (tree? Archaeological dig?)
- google.com :: who is your "googleganger"? That is, a person with the same name as you who has a substantive presence online. For example, my Googleganger is Helen J Burgess, a researcher who studies sleep disorders and melatonin.
- labs.google.com :: the "google playground." Lots of interesting tools here.
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_visualization :: some background about "information visualization." If you're planning to do a visual representation of your googleography, you may find something here that could be useful.

Once you have the information you want, mash it all up together. This is how our lives are anyway: a collection of fragments, pieced together to tell a "whole" story. Think about the exercises we've just done in class – what is your overarching narrative/conceptual metaphor? And how can you use the information online to help you get that metaphor across?

A word about quantity: projects will differ widely according to their form, so I'm giving you guidelines on the *amount of incoming information* you should aim for instead. I want you to use *at least 20* different information sources to construct your googleography. List them all in a works cited. How you interpret and represent the information is up to you.

The following class dates are important for this project:

Library day: 13th Sept. Meet in Library 259. Our resident librarian Gergana Kostova will give some tips on where to find information.

Brainstorming day: 20th Sept. If you're stuck and want to try out ideas with me and your peers.
Due date: 25th Sept. Bring your project to class and be prepared to show it to your peers.

About Grading and Format.

You can use any physical or digital format you want, but the best ones have an "organizing principle" of some kind, i.e. a metaphorical or structural organization that helps pull everything together in a unique way: to use the language we talked about last week, this is a narrative (an interesting retelling of the facts), not a story (the plain facts). Think about the long list of metaphors we were able to come up with, and the conceptual metaphors we used to organize them (life as journey, weather, sport, etc). A conceptual metaphor is a good way to help you structure your narrative, regardless of what physical format you choose. Otherwise you end up with a list or a bunch of pictures on a poster board, which is not very interesting or intellectually challenging. Here are some examples:

Tell a story using a specific metaphor or framing narrative. Organizing principles: narrative; whatever the metaphor is.

Make a map/model of a space or place. Organizing principle: umm, map (i.e. space). Could be physical or Google.

Create an information diagram of some description using some kind of metaphor. For example, one of the projects I got last year was a video collage. In the middle was an eye. The eye looked up and down and around and as it did so, different images appeared. So organizing principle: eye. Or, perhaps a timeline (organizing principle, time) - but make it interesting in some way so it's not just a listing of facts.

Create some kind of spoof on an existing format that uses a lot of jargon. Organizing principles: corporate powerpoint, advertisement, scientific paper.

I will be grading on the following criteria:

- Depth or direction of research (i.e. how you chose to do the research/what you chose to leave out or put in/how thorough your research was)
- Strength of organizing principle/conceptual metaphor
- Success in grouping information in a way that tells a narrative successfully (was it organized? Engaging? Unexpected?)
- Comprehensiveness or completeness (ie is it a rich experience, or one with not much content?)
- Quality of execution/attention to detail/ quality of written expression.

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“Day Without Texts” Diary: Due Tuesday 9th October

“I couldn’t think of anything else to do that didn’t involved texts so I worked out. I haven’t done that much exercise total since high school” – former student doing this assignment.

Your second assignment is to spend an entire day without interacting with any texts. First, go to Zachary McCune’s “noe web day” site at http://www.thames2thayer.com/noe_web_day_journal.html. You are going to do a similar exercise, except with *all* texts (not just the internet).

The purpose of this project is for you to understand just how immersed we are in the world of written, multimedia, aural, visual texts.

Note: Accidents happen. If you “break the rules” because you forgot what you were doing, note that down and reflect on it as part of the process. **But be as honest as possible, and take this assignment seriously.** Faking results because you couldn’t gather up enough willpower to put down your Xbox controller or tell your mom not to text you is the same as faking lab results or just not doing the assignment at all.

Format:

- Keep a literal diary – everything you do.
- At each point where you would have used a text, write that down, and say why.
- Write the diary up into a formatted paper the next day (5 pages). You can make some narrative choices here: are you going to set it up as an entry-based diary, like McCune does? Or tell a more integrated story?
- **Synthesize it all at the end** (the most important part) – discuss the overall experience, how it made you feel, what it makes you think about living in a textual world (2 pages).

What counts as a text?

- Books, newspapers etc
- Notes
- Product packaging at the grocery store/home
- Internet
- Text messaging, including any freakishly preternatural ability you may have at touch-typing
- Cellphone (except for emergencies)
- Anything with numbers
- Wii, Playstation, Xbox, etc
- Signs (except for safety, e.g. road signs)
- Television & other media that might contain text. Radio is OK.

The apparatus:

- Obviously, in order to keep this diary, you’re going to need to record the experience as you go. So, the one exception to the no texts rule (aside from the caveats below) is that you can interact with the recording apparatus. i.e. a notebook, video camera, or audio recording device. If you are easily tempted, don’t use your phone to do the above.

DISCLAIMER: USE YOUR COMMON SENSE! IF YOU NEED TO CALL 911 BECAUSE YOU CUT OFF YOUR/SOMEONE ELSE’S TOES, DO IT. IF YOU NEED TO READ STOP SIGNS AND YOUR SPEEDOMETER TO DRIVE, DO IT. DO NOT TAKE NOTES WHILE DRIVING/PLAYING FETCH WITH VICIOUS PITBULLS/EATING WITH SHARP IMPLEMENTS.

You will be graded on:

- the **completeness of the journal**: 5 page diary, 2 page synthesis.
- the **detail you enter into**. Don't just say "I would have looked it up but couldn't." Say why, what alternatives you considered, how you think other people might be coping with the same problem.
- the **quality and maturity of your insights**. Consider how your experiences might be related to other ideas you're currently reading about/studies you've heard of/people you've been following. Simply having an experience is pointless unless you can make it meaningful.
- the **quality of your written expression**: fluency of style, error-free mechanics, sophistication of narrative voice.

FIELDWORK EXERCISE: ORGANIZATION SPACE

In the final discussion sessions, we'll be talking about Levy's theories on organizing information. So, let's put his ideas to the test and do a field trip. The objective of this exercise is to find out how the way we organize our information offline and online works out in real life.

The plan is to choose a physical space, and its online analog, and spend an hour or so in each space (during the time you'd normally meet for class) and complete the tasks.

PART ONE: TUESDAY 13th NOVEMBER: A PHYSICAL SPACE

Your task for Tuesday is to go find and map an information space – any space that organizes information itself or stores objects in a systematic way. A few examples: a library, an office, a desk, a refrigerator, a bookshelf. Pick your space: if you have to be on campus a lot this week, you might want to use the Library; otherwise, you can go home or to your local public library (or other information space – how about a grocery store?). Make it a *physical space* (because you'll be doing the digital one next).

I: MAP THE SPACE (1 page)

- Draw a map of the area. Label whatever breaks the information up into sections (aisles, shelves, desk areas etc).
- Now draw a map of yourself navigating through the space. For example, if it's a grocery store and you are shopping, draw a line showing the pathway you take (including repeats, if you double back). If it's your desk, keep track of the movements you perform as you work through different tasks.

II: ANALYZE THE SPACE: WRITING (2 pages)

- Levy suggests we have a compulsive need to order and classify things. Take a look at your space and decide: how is it organized (by genre? By some mathematical system? By usage?)?
- Now try & put together a rationale for exactly why it's organized that way. Why is one thing placed next to another? Why are sections or aisles broken up the way they are?
- Finally, attempt to do some analysis. For example, what does this space tell you about our culture? E.g. does it tell you we value some things more than others? Does it tell you that we think about information in certain ways? Do you think it could be done differently if we were different kind of people? Do you think it reveals anything we are reluctant to share, or are afraid of – i.e. an "anxiety of order"?

PART TWO: THURSDAY NOVEMBER 15th: A DIGITAL SPACE

Now that you've gotten a grasp on your physical space, find its digital analog. For example, Big Box Bookstore → Amazon or B&N; Grocery Store → Online grocery store; Library → Online library (Google Books, IPL, etc); Desk → your computer desktop; Bookshelf → E-reader.

Repeat the same steps as you did above, and write up your results in the same way as you did above (1 page map, 2 pages writing).

The diary is due in class on Tuesday November the 20th.