The Google's Eye View
How Search Engines Shape Our Picture of Cyberspace

Infosys 290, Sect. 2

Search Engines: Technology, Society and Business

Geoff Nunberg, SIMS

11/21/05

The Phenomenology of Cyberspace

Phenomenology: The study of "phenomena": appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience…. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view.

—*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

The Phenomenology of Cyberspace

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Questions:

What mental models do we construct to make sense of the discourse of the Web?

How do search engines interact with and shape those models?

The Usefulness of Looking at Breakdowns

Cases where perception and reality clash in dysfunctional or disturbing ways

Spatial Models of Print Discourse

Texts as places

Cf "above" and "below"; "elsewhere."
"Where does Marx say that history repeats itself?"

Conception of the public sphere/ public space

Images of public sphere in print forms and institutions

Cf. the notion of the "trésor"

Libraries, anthologies, dictionaries, in a word "treasuries" [trésors], alongside of encyclopedic collections, delimit a vast territory on which are cast the signs required for knowledge, the expression of identities, and communication among the members of the group.

-Alain Rey, "Les trésors de la langue," 1986

The Properties of Public Space, 2: Metrical space

That vast aggregate of words and phrases which constitutes the Vocabulary of English-speaking men presents... the aspect of one of those nebulous masses familiar to the astronomer, in which a clear and unmistakable nucleus shades off on all sides, through zones of decreasing brightness, to a dim marginal film that seems to end nowhere, but to lose itself imperceptibly in the surrounding darkness.…

  James Murray, "General Explanation" to the OED
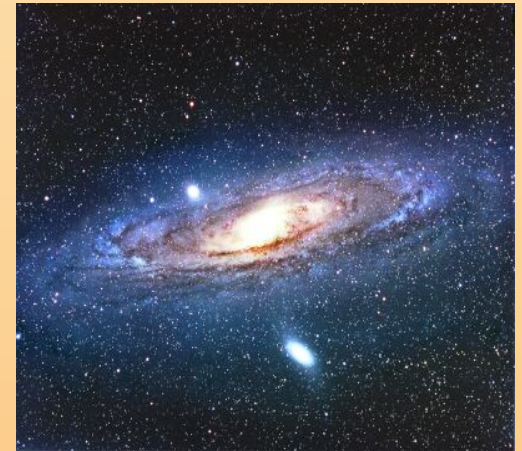
Spatial Models of Print Discourse

Properties of the space of print discourse

1. Spatialization into center and margin, inside and outside, "scene and obscene"

2. Commonality/objectivity: general agreement on picture of discourse

3. Canonicity: Core & periphery — all elements of all subdomains are ordered wrt "centrality" of membership (i.e., discursive space is metrical, not just topological)

Canonicity permits "essentialist" abridgement:

Spatial Models of Print Discourse

Spatial models rest on the mode of print circulation

Distinction between public and private

Correlation between diffusion, accessibility & reputation

The more famous/reputed a text is, the more widely it is diffused and the more accessible it is (over both space and time).

Symbolic Functions of Form:
The Dictionary as a Comprehensive Representation

Modeling Discourse Space, The Form of Collections

E-L. Boulée, plan for the Bibliothèque du Roi, 1785
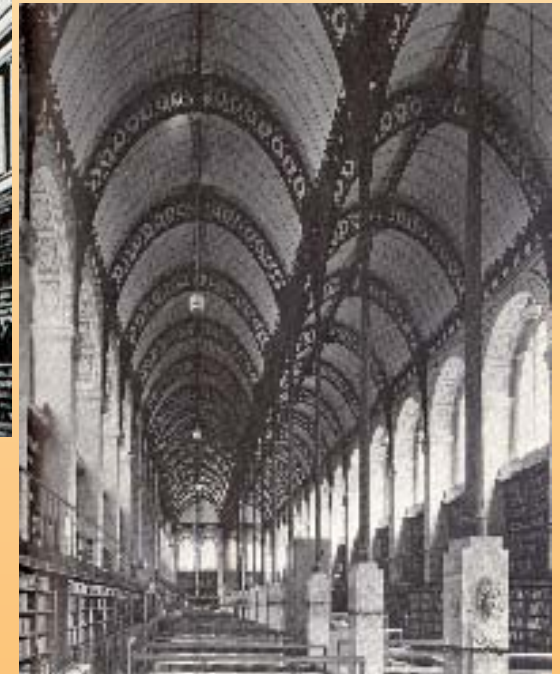
Labrouste, Bibliothèque Ste. Geneviève, 1851

Library of the Escorial, 1543

Modeling Discourse Space, The Form of Collections

Smirke, British
Musem Reading
Room, 1851

Pelz/Casey Reading
Room, LOC, ca 1898

Labrouste, Bibliothèque
Nationale 1868
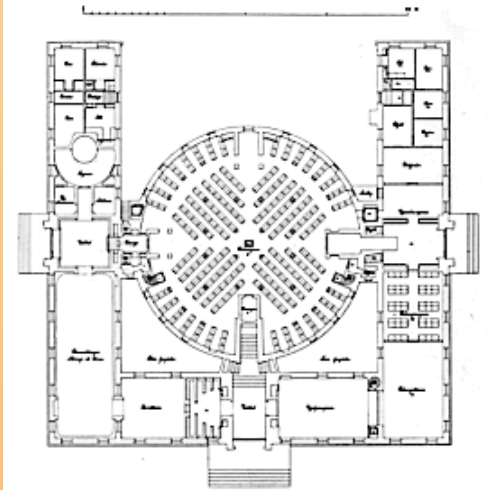
Asplund, Stockholm
City Library, 1928

Modeling Discourse Space, The Form of Collections
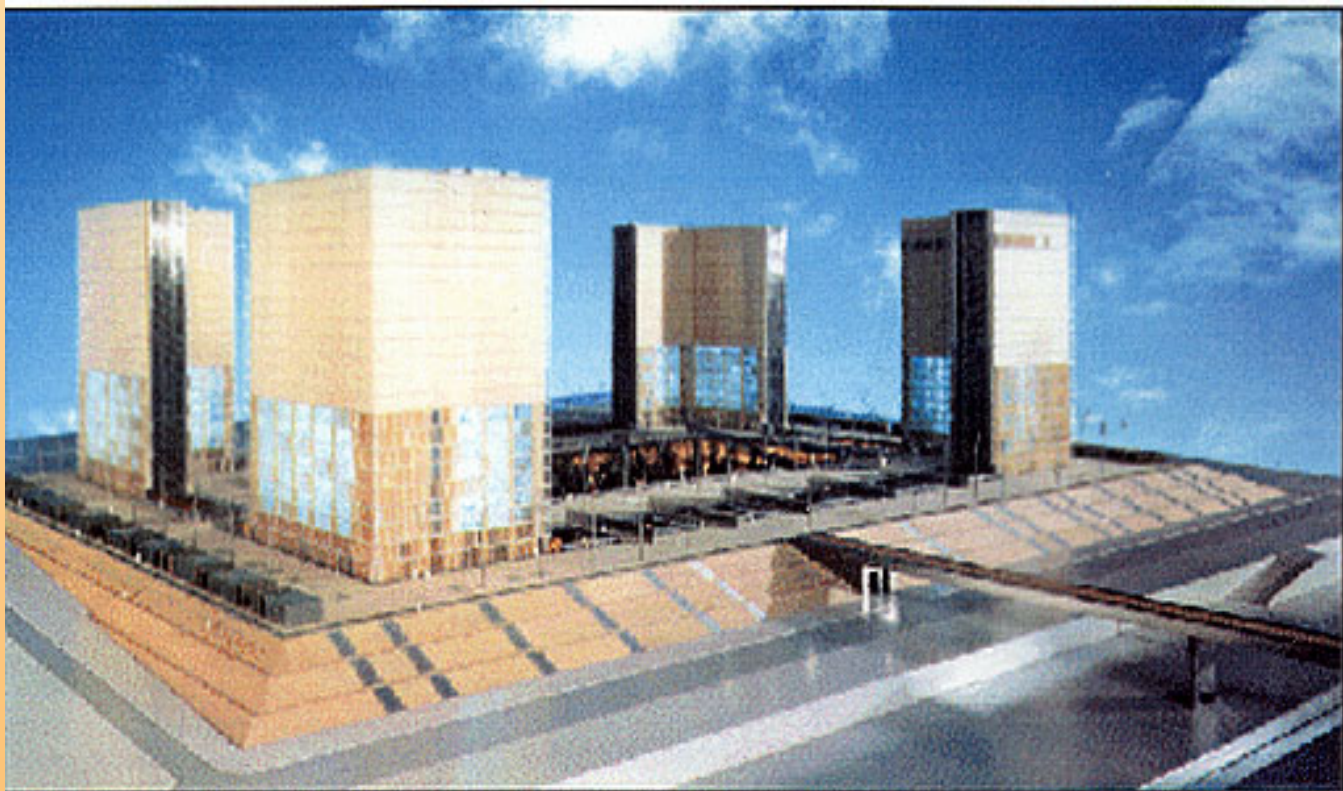
D. Perrault, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1994

Formal Correlates of Metrical Space:
The Book as a Public Presence
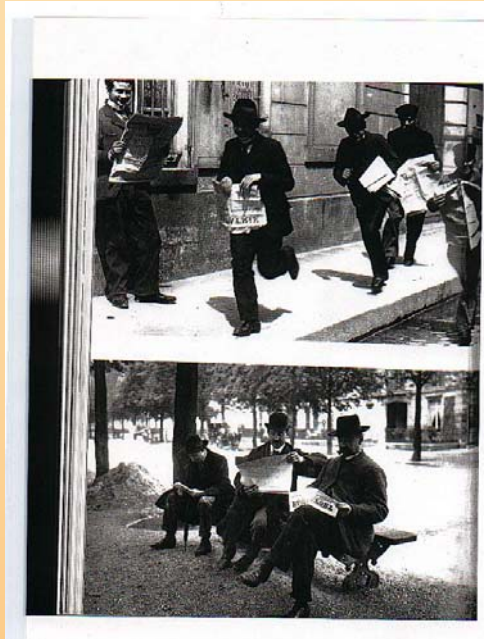
The newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life…creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. --Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
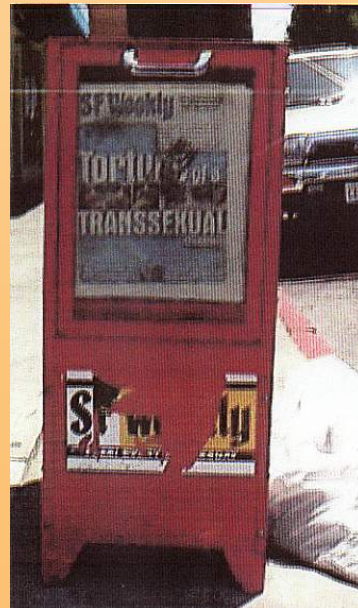
The Book as a Public Presence, 2

Spatial Models of Electronic Discourse, 1.

The New Jerusalem, ca. 1992

Cyberspace: A world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and alter-human agency takes on form: sights, sounds, presences never seen on the surface of the earth blossoming in a vast electronic night. . . . From vast databases that constitute the culture's deposited wealth, every document is available, every recording is playable, and every picture is viewable. The realm of pure information, filling like a lake…

> — Michael Benedikt, Introduction to *Cyberspace*, MIT Press, 1991

Spatial Models of Electronic Discourse, 1

Cyberspace: The Morning After

[The Internet is] a place where crime is rampant and every twisted urge can be satisfied. Thousands of virtual streets are lined with casinos, porn shops, and drug dealers. Scam artists and terrorists skulk behind seemingly lawful Web sites. And cops wander through once in a while, mostly looking lost. It's the Strip in Las Vegas, the Red Light district in Amsterdam, and New York's Times Square at its worst, all rolled into one -- and all easily accessible from your living room couch.

"The Underground Web," *Business Week*, 9/2/02

Spatialization in a digital world?

Blurring of public & private -- problems for archiving, circumscribing discourse

Universal accessibility -- difficulty of estimating reputation & authority

Absence of indications of material boundaries of documents & collections

How Spatial Metaphors Can Lead Us Astray in the Digital World

Faulty Analogies: Cf the debates over internet filters

"Why do underage children have access to porno web sites on computers in the children's library section? Isn't this the same as having pornographic material available on the shelves for them to check out?"

"[Libraries] are simply declining to put on their computer screens the same content they have traditionally excluded from their bookshelves."— *Solicitor General Ted Olson, arguing CIPA case before Supreme Court, 3/4/03*

While Mr. [Paul] Smith emphasized the burden the law put on adults who have to request unblocking, Justice Stephen G. Breyer said: "What's the burden in asking? I grew up in a world where certain materials were kept in a special place."

Whereas pornography was once furtively glimpsed at dimly lighted newsstands or seedy adult theaters, today it is everywhere. It pours in over the Internet, sometimes uninvited, sometimes via eagerly forwarded links… *Bus. Week*

Issues of "Accessibility"

2000 OCLC study: 7.1 million unique Web sites (projects to 11 million unique sites as of September, 2001). 68,000 "adult" sites (projects to 100,000 in 2002)

Cf Blaise Cronin expert report in CIPA case: "It is estimated that 100,000 sites contain child pornography."

Cf Ocala, Florida *Star Banner*, which quotes a spokeman for the US Customs Service.

[Pamela Paul asserts] that increased porn supply on the Internet (260 million pages of it, by her count) creates increased demand. Review of *Pornified*, NYT, 9/11/05

20 million view adult pages… are apparently hosted on sites in the United States or Canada. NRC study, 2002
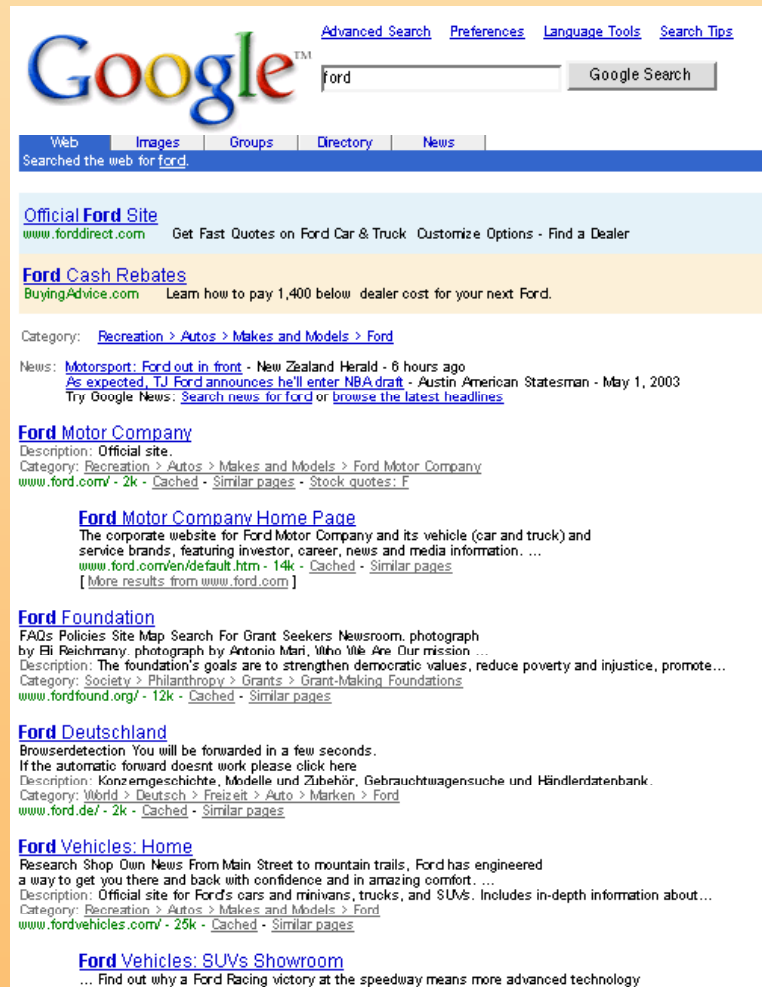
The role of search engines…

The Internet -- Piazza or Souk?

When Google Supports the Idea of Internet Community

("Google takes advantage of the uniquely democratic nature of the Web")

… and When it Doesn't

A Racist Hoax

THE FRANKLIN PROPHECY
Recorded by Charles Coteworth Pinckney
Delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787

I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and impenetration. The menace, gentlemen, is the Jews. In whatever country Jews have settled in any great number, they have lowered its moral tone; depreciated its commercial integrity; have segregated themselves and have not been assimilated; have sneered at and tried to undermine the Christian religion upon which that nation is founded, by objecting to its restrictions; have built up a state within the state; and when opposed have tried to strangle that country to death financially, as in the case of Spain and Portugal.

For over 1,700 years, the Jews have been bewailing their sad fate in that they have been exiled from their homeland, as they call Palestine. But gentlemen, did the world give it to them in fee simple, they would at once find some reason for not returning. Why? Because they are vampires, and vampires do not live on vampires. They cannot live only among themselves. They must subsist on Christians and other people not of their race. If you do not exclude them from these United States, in their Constitution, in less than 200 years they will have swarmed here in such great numbers that they will dominate and devour the land and change our form of government...
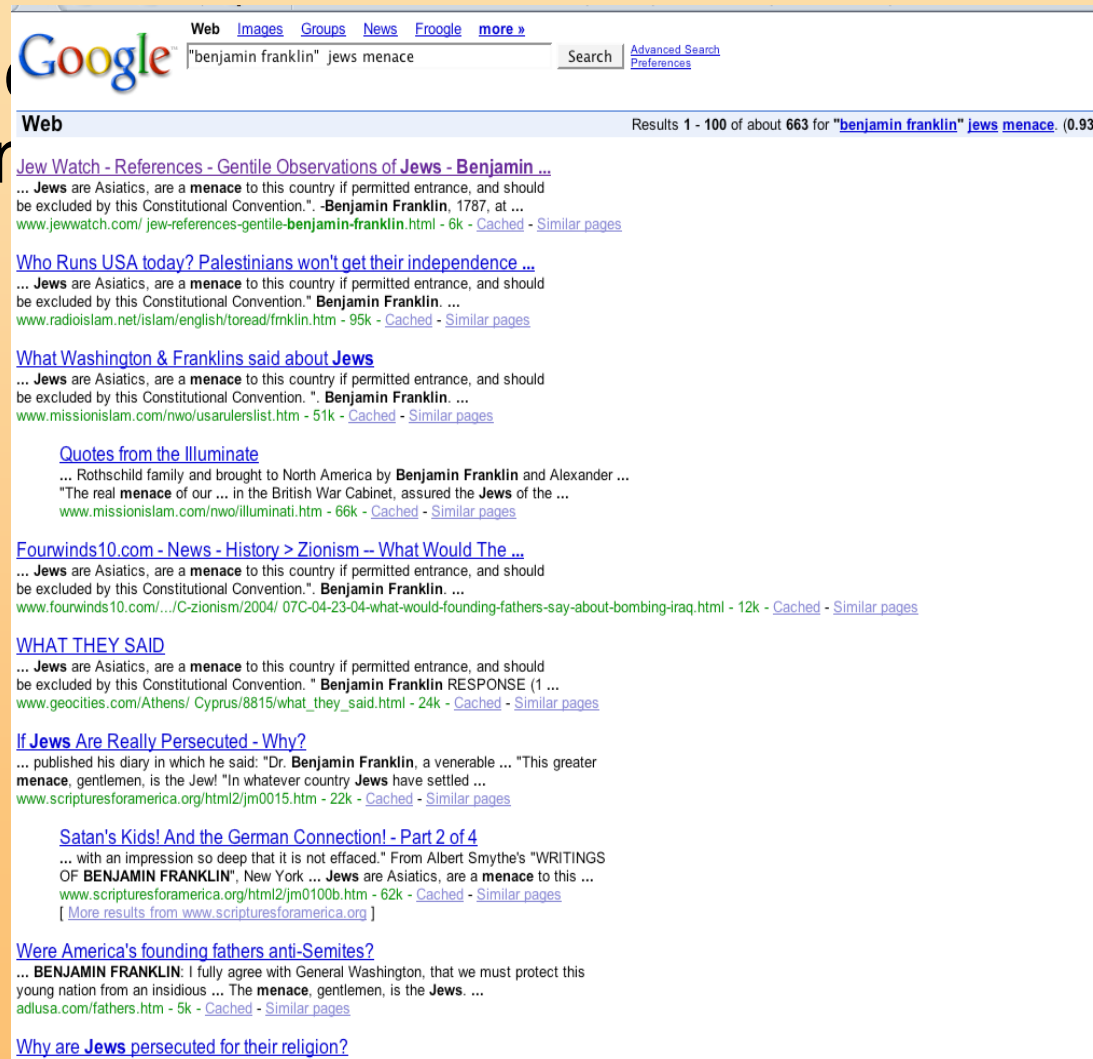
http://www.jewwatch.com/jew-references-gentile-benjamin-franklin.html

Racism on the Web

"Prophecy" was probably concocted by William Dudley Pelley, American Nazi, in the early 1930's. First appeared on Feb. 3, 1934 in *Liberation*, weekly journal published in Asheville, NC

"I cannot find a single original source that gives the slightest justification for believing that the Prophecy is anything more than a barefaced forgery. Not a word have I discovered in Franklin's letters and papers expressing any such sentiments against the Jews as are ascribed to him by the Nazis — American and German." Charles Beard, *NY Times*, March 10, 1937.

Pervasiveness of Racist Speech

Ca. 700 Google hits for Franklin prophesy

Pervasiveness of Racist Speech -- Search on "Jew"

The "Bias" of Google News

Small conservative Web sites such as Useless-Knowledge, Men's News Daily, Michnews and ChronWatch turn up in disproportionate numbers when clicking on news about John Kerry… By contrast, a search on George Bush or George W. Bush typically results in a fairly neutral, evenly balanced set of results from both sides of the political spectrum, with many of the same small conservative sites showing up to sing the president's praises.

What's going on? Have Google's search results been hijacked by Fox News?

http://ojr.org/ojr/technology/1095977436.php

The "Bias" of Google News

What's up with Google News? The CBS report has been all the buzz in the MSM and in the blogosphere since it broke a little after 10am today. But as of 7pm EST, there is no link to any coverage of the report on the Google News home page. And there's not a single link to the CBS story on Google's Top U.S. news stories. Instead, Google lists these as the top U.S. stories:…

Hello, Google news? Reader William Schultz says: "Looks like a biased news search algorithm in Google News." Yup. (Roger Simon noticed the Google News omission earlier in the day.) Michelle Malkin, 1/10/05

You've got to hand it to "al-Qaedarrific" online news aggregator Google News: they are consistent…. Google News once again shows its bias early Thursday morning, leading its "top stories" coverage of a possible U.S. troop drawdown in Iraq with an article from an organization called the World Peace Herald, with the headline, "U.S. plans Iraq Troops cuts as revolt rages." The article is written with the decidedly "Bush Lied, People Died!" far left tone one would expect …http://confederateyankee.mu.nu/archives/107298.php

The Menace of "Omingooglisation"

Once again, we see the risk of a crushing American domination in defining the idea that subsequent generations will form of the world. The criteria for choosing [the books in the Google print collection] will be strongly marked by the Anglo-Saxon point of view, which imparts a particular coloring to the diversity of civilizations. It would be harmful and detestable if one found in the English and American databases only narratives and interpretations [about the French Revolution] that were biased in multiple ways -- the valliant British aristocrats triumphing over the bloody Jacobins, the guillotine blotting out the rights of man.

       -- Jean-Noël Jeanneney, Director, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 24 jan. 2005

Voici que s'affirme le risque d'une domination écrasante de l'Amérique dans la définition de l'idée que les prochaines générations se feront du monde. Les critères du choix seront puissamment marqués... par le regard qui est celui des Anglo-Saxons, avec ses couleurs spécifiques par rapport à la diversité des civilisations. [Il serait délétère] et détestable si l'on trouvait dans les seules bases de données anglaises ou américaines un récit et une interprétation qui y étaient biaisés de multiples façons --- les vaillants aristocrates britanniques triomphant des jacobins sanguinaires, la guillotine occultant les droits de l'homme. "Prenons l'offensive contre l'unilatéralisme,"

29

Fears of English Hegemony...

"The Web is the ultimate act of intellectual colonialism." Director of Russian ISP, 1999

"Nearly 70 per cent of the world's Web sites are in English, at times crowding out voices and views." Kofi Annan, 12-Jan-04

Why the confusion of Google Print and Google search engine?

Why the perception of "crowding out"?

The "Omnigooglization" of the Web

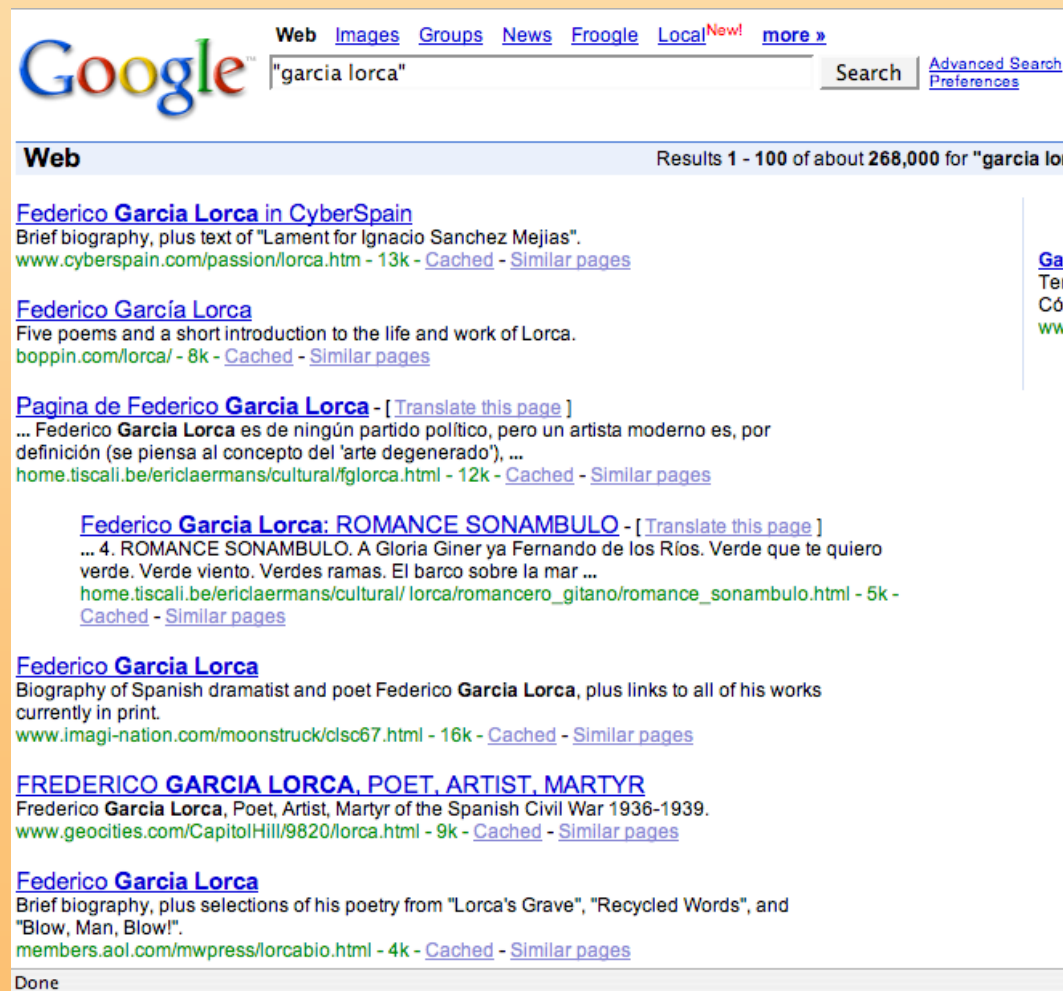1st 50 Google hits for "Roland Barthes":
44 English, 4 French, 1 Spanish, 1 German

Omnigooglization, 2

1st 50 Google hits for "Garcia Lorca":
   45 English, 4 Spanish, 1 Italian

Where Spatial Metaphors Lead Us Astray

Imputations of metrical space: notions of "commons" and "community"

Cf. James F. Moore (Berkman Center), on "the global consciousness of the second superpower":

The Internet and other interactive media continue to penetrate more and more deeply all world society... The collective power of texting, blogging, instant messaging, and email across millions of actors cannot be overestimated. Like a mind constituted of millions of inter-networked neurons, the social movement is capable of astonishingly rapid and sometimes subtle community consciousness and action… the emergent democracy of the second superpower is alive with touching and being touched by each other, as the community works to create wisdom and to take action…. Not every idea will take hold in the big mind of the second superpower—but the one that eventually catches fire is started by an individual.

Lower-Casing the Internet?

Effective with this sentence, Wired News will no longer capitalize the "I" in internet. At the same time, Web becomes web and Net becomes net. Why? The simple answer is because there is no earthly reason to capitalize any of these words. Actually, there never was… a change in our house style was necessary to put into perspective what the internet is: another medium for delivering and receiving information. That it transformed human communication is beyond dispute. But no more so than moveable type did in its day. Or the radio. Or television. *Wired*, 8/16/04

(Cf earlier capitalization of "the Radio" and "the Cinema." Cf also, "the power grid."

"I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You do not know us... You have not engaged in our great and gathering conversation…. You do not know our culture, our ethics, or [our] unwritten codes." John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace"