UC Berkeley School of Information

Introduction:
In search of "information"

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IS 218

Concepts of Information

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Geoff:

Subdividing academic space

What's the *i* doing in iSchool?

Confusion about "information"

Paul:

Preview of the course

Subdividing academic space

The sources of academic geography

Subdividing academic space

"In the republic of letters, a man can live as himself, but in the bureaucracy of letters he must continually declare his style and department, and submit to an examination of his purpose and credentials at the frontier to every field." Raymond Williams

How "fields" are defined:

> By subject matter: Xology = "the study of X" (art history, Italian, ophthamology, etc.)

> By institutional setting (e.g., as schools, departments, majors, programs, etc.)

> By markets (e.g., who hires/funds whom?)

> By literatures and curricula (e.g., canonization of course structure)

> By formal systems of classfication (catalogues)

> By formal associations (prof. societies, funding sources, cross-institutional relations, etc.)

> By sites of discourse (journals, conferences, informal rules)

> By rhetoric/ language

Subdividing academic space

How "fields" are defined:

> What circulates between contemporary philosophers… is not only canonical texts. but a whole philosophical doxa carried along by intellectual rumour — labels of schools. truncated quotations, functioning as slogans in celebration or polemics - by academic routine…which perhaps do more than anything else to constitute the "common sense" of an intellectual generation. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," 1983

Subdividing academic space

An intellectual discipline exists when a number of persons believe themselves to possess an identity defined by the common subject of their intellectual activity, when many or all of the problems which they study are raised by or derived from the … body of literature and oral interpretation produced by those who regard themselves as practitioners of the discipline. … When its members publish works in organs bearing the name of the discipline, a discipline has an intellectual and social structure.

Edward Shils, 1982

Subdividing "subject matters"

TREE OF KNOWLEDGE, TITLE-PAGE OF R. LULL, ARBOR SCIEN[T]
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The varieties of academic organization; fields built around:

Professional/institutional practice: education, journalism
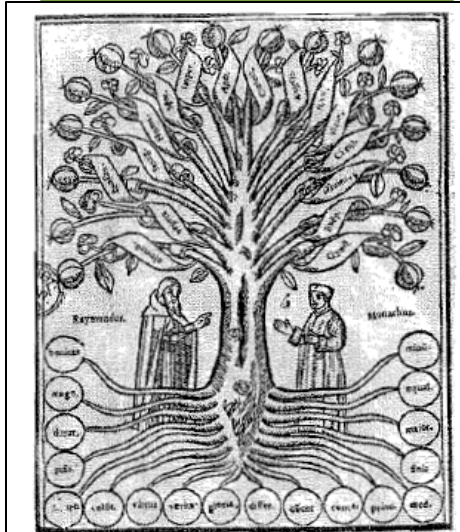
Organizational roles: marketing, management,

Technologies: pharmacy, CS, nuclear engineering

Intellectual traditions: philosophy, comparative literature

Human faculties: psychology, linguistics…

"Natural" domains: chemistry, genetics…

But like other 'trees of knowledge', this is arbitrary and reductive.

Subdividing academic space

The challenges of interdisciplinarity:

Cf the experience of cognitive science, communications, social relations, media studies, cultural studies, American studies…

A passel of prefixes: inter-, cross-, trans-, multi-…

What puts the *i* in iSchool?

Why not the eSchool, v-School, cyberSchool…?

The question everybody learns to duck:
"you're in the School of Information ... so what is information?"

Professor of _____?

WELCOME TO THE iSCHOOL

Exploring the future of information

What puts the *i* in iSchool?

WELCOME TO THE iSCHOOL

Exploring the future of information

What does it mean to be a "school of information"? Is it computer science or library science? Is it social science, law, or business? Is it information architecture or multimedia design? Are we pioneering the next big navigation tool? Or are we concerned with "the human element" of information: how it connects, separates, affects people?

The answer to all these questions is "yes," because the study of information — how it is created, shared, and transformed into actionable knowledge — touches a wide range of issues and disciplines, just as it addresses the vast diversity of human needs, activities, and relationships.

AnnaLee Saxenian, Dean's statement

The Scope of "information"

It's not something we can see, really. We certainly can't touch, taste, hear, or smell it. Yet it's always there when we look for it, available wherever we bother to direct our attention. We can glean it from the pages of a book or the morning newspaper and from the glowing phosphors of a video screen. Scientists find it stored in our genes and in the lush complexity of the rain forest. The Vatican Library has a bunch of it, and so does Madonna's latest CD. And it's always in the air where people come together, whether to work, play, or just gab. What is it that can be so pervasive and yet so mysterious? Information, of course…

Business Week, "The Information Revolution," 1994

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What does "it" refer to?

Different concepts or different conceptions?

The scope of "information"

Is *information* monosemous (one mng)

E.g., *structure* (OED): The mutual relation of the constituent parts or elements of a whole as determining its peculiar nature or character

...ambiguous? (several words, diff. meanings) *bank*, *duck*, etc.

...polysemous (one word, several related mngs)

E.g., *gossip* (activity, person, content); *terror* (emotion, that which elicits emotion, activity…); *news* (Did you hear the ____/listen to the ____?")

"Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? … if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

(more on this next week…)

Dimensions of variation in conceptions of information

Popular (folkloric) vs. technical/scientific conceptions of information — but lines are fuzzy

- "Information" as a category of everyday discourse
  Can you give me some information about dehumidifiers?

- "Information" in public discourse & policy, education, journalism (~*haves/have nots*; ~ *technology*, etc.)

- "Information" as a theoretical notion in philosophy, information theory, CS, cognitive science & linguistics, informatics, economics, political science, public policy, business & management, etc.

- "Information" as a theoretical notion in genetics, biology, physics, etc.

… and each influences the others…

Later on…

How did "information" become a central, self-conscious category in modern thought?

Assignment for 1/19

After looking at the ischool elevator stories the faculty provided in 2008, please prepare one of your own -- a prepackaged description of what exactly the program is about and why we're different from other faculties, which you might give to a vaguely interested friend, relative, or airline seat mate. Or Paul's Uncle Tom. (NOT to the provost or an academic review board!) This shouldn't take longer to recite than the length of an elevator ride -- the iSchool elevator! It shouldn't require a trip to Dubai. Submit it to Paul and Geoff by email before class.