What is Information?
Examining Perceptions of Information Through Visual Representations

Introduction

Building upon J. Hartel's (2014) work investigating the nature of information using visual research methods, graduate students conducted a visual research project exploring conceptions of "information". Original drawings depicting information, termed 'iSquares', were collected from members of the general public. These were then analyzed through the lens of M. K. Buckland's' article "Information as Thing" (1991).

The researchers hoped to determine whether the perceptions of information as drawn on the iSquares would conform to Buckland's three types of information, or if the visual representations would diverge from and thus challenge Buckland's theory of information.

Method

Following the iSquare protocol established by Hartel (2014), student researchers used the draw-and-write technique to collect visual representations of information from members of the public. Participants were given seven minutes and a 4" by 4" piece of paper, an iSquare. They were asked to draw their answer to the question "*What is information?*" on the front of the iSquare, and support their drawing with a written response to the prompt "*Information Is…*" on the reverse side. In total 180 drawings were collected.

The iSquare drawings were analyzed and categorized using the framework of Buckland's three types of information: "information-as-thing" (information as provided by tangible objects), "information-as-process" (the gaining of information through communication), and "information-as-knowledge" (the intangible ideas which inform us) (1991).

Results

The majority of the iSquares do conform to Buckland's three types of information; in addition, many of the drawings contain more than one of these information types. However, some of the iSquares take a more abstract approach to depicting information, and as such do not fall into any of Buckland's categories.

Results from the 180 iSquares:

Information-As-Thing:	105	Abstract Representations:	36
Information-As-Process:	63	Two of Buckland's Information Forms:	40
Information-As-Knowledge:	49	Three of Buckland's Information Forms:	16

See *figures 1-6* for a visual display of results.

Figure 1: Drawings depicting Buckland's "information-as-thing"

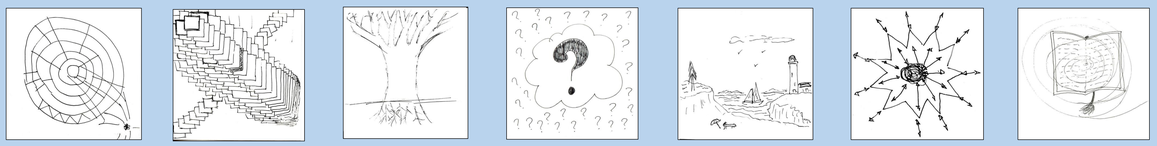

Figure 4: Abstract representations of information not conforming to Buckland's information types

Figure 2: Drawings depicting Buckland's "information-as-process"

Figure 5: Drawings conforming to two of Buckland's information types

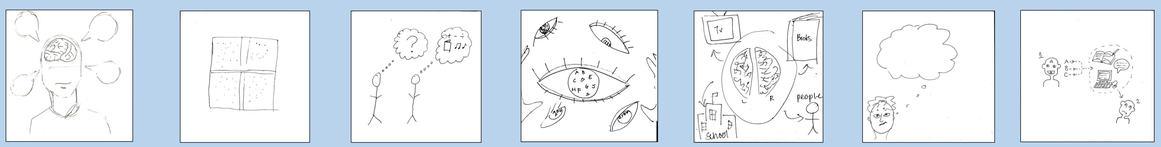

Figure 3: Drawings depicting Buckland's "information-as-knowledge"

Figure 6: Drawings conforming to all three of Buckland's information types

Conclusion

Although the majority of the iSquares do indeed conform to Buckland's three information types, the iSquares also challenge this definition of information. For one, most of the drawings cannot be neatly organized into one of Buckland's specific categories; instead, conceptions of information are shown to be more complex, with two or more of Buckland's information types frequently depicted on the same iSquare. Secondly, nearly a quarter of the iSquares contain graphical representations of information that are more abstract in nature, and thus exist outside of Buckland's information types. This indicates that, while Buckland's definition of information suits more concrete understandings of information (such as information as physical object or observable activity), it is less compatible with broader and more intangible understandings of information.

This project offers a clear illustration of the inherent difficulty in trying to create one definitive definition for "information", as conceptions of information are both more complex and fluid than a single definition allows.

Work Cited

Buckland, M.K. (1991). Information as thing. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, *42*(5), 351-360.

Hartel, J. (2014). An arts-informed study of information using the draw-and-write technique. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology, 65*(7), 1349–1367.

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