USING LIBRARY DATABASES TO DO DIGITAL HUMANITIES WORK IN THE CLASSROOM

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URL: slides.com/amybarlow/distantreading/
TALKING POINTS

• What is distant reading?
• Distant reading for the student researcher
• Databases and distant reading
• Sample Activity: MLAIB
• Conclusions
Distant Reading

“The idea of processing content in (subjects, themes, persons, places, etc.) or information about (publication date, place, author, title) a large number of textual items without engaging in the reading of the actual text.”

Johanna Drucker, Professor of Information Studies, UCLA
No reading.

Distant reading is a digital humanities concept invented by literary critic Franco Moretti to describe a computer-based analysis of text.

Unlike the methodology of close reading, which relies on a careful, concentrated reading of a text, distant reading uses computer applications to mine texts on a scale that would be impossible for humans.
Why?

"Put simply, there is too much of it to read."

Bob Nicholson, Digital Victorianist
How not to read texts

There are many distant reading methods, from basic word frequency experiments to complex computer programming.

An example of a basic exercise:

Choose a text → Download .txt file → Make a word cloud → Analyze
And not so basic.

Scholars working in interdisciplinary teams to develop systems for text mining and visualizing the torrent of information available via social media and other digital sources.

Distant Reading for Undergraduate Researchers
When performed as part of the research process, distant reading can help students to:

- Organize and wrap their minds around a large, complex collection of secondary literature
- Get acquainted with the history of a field or subject
- Survey scholarship on a topic, identifying patterns, trends, and oddities worthy of further exploration through traditional methods
- Develop hypotheses
Popular research assignments that require students to survey, organize, and analyze scholarship on a large scale:

- Reviews of literature
- Historiography
- Reception studies
- Others?

Image source: Baltic Worlds
It may not be feasible, however, for students to download massive amounts of journal content for common distant reading experiments, such word clouds and text mining.
Why not?

- Time
- Learning curve/Technical expertise
- Format: No HTML, OCR, or poor OCR
- Publishers' licensing restrictions

(see NEU LibGuide)
An alternative to text mining

- Librarians can leverage their in-depth knowledge of commercial library databases to design distant reading activities that take advantage of bibliographic metadata.

- Approach supported by Drucker's definition of distant reading.

- Provides simple alternative to data mining and other advanced research methods.
Methodology

1. Select a database
2. Choose keyword(s) and construct a search
3. Gather data
4. Plot data
5. Analyze results
Sample Activity: MLA International Bibliography

Sample Activity: Distant Reading Workshop for ENGL 201

Today we will use MLA International Bibliography to experiment with distant readings of critical texts.

What is MLA International Bibliography?
MLA International Bibliography is a detailed bibliography of journal articles, book chapters, books, conference papers, and dissertations. Produced by the Modern Language Association, the electronic version of the bibliography dates back to the 1920s. It is compiled by the staff of the MLA office in NYC with the cooperation of more than 120 contributing bibliographers in the US and abroad.

To begin, let’s all use MLAIB to search for the article: “Looking at the Monster: Frankenstein and Film”

- What year was this article published?
- Was it published as a book, journal article, dissertation, or other?
- What is the language of the article?
- What is the article about according to the bibliographers at MLA? In other words, what Subject Terms are used to describe the article?

Distant Reading Frankenstein Criticism

1. Start a new search.
Looking at the Monster: Frankenstein and Film

Authors: Heffernan, James A W.

Peer Reviewed: Yes
ISSN: 0093-1896
1539-7858 (electronic)

General Subject
Subject Literature: English literature
Areas: Period: 1800-1899
Primary Subject Author: Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft (1797-1851)
Primary Subject Work: Frankenstein
Genre: novel

Subject Terms: role of the visual; relationship to monstrosity; in film adaptation; by Whale, James (1886-1957); Branagh, Kenneth Charles (1960- ); compared to Brooks, Mel (1926- ); Young Frankenstein (1974)

General Subject
Literature Topic: dramatic arts
Areas: Media film

Subject Terms: film adaptation; role of the visual; relationship to monstrosity; in film adaptation; of Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft (1797-1851); Frankenstein (1818), by Whale, James (1886-1957), Branagh, Kenneth Charles (1960- ); compared to Brooks, Mel (1926- ); Young Frankenstein (1974)

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<th>Title</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Dogs and Monsters: Moral Status Claims in the Fiction of Dean Koontz</td>
<td>By: Smith, Stephen W.</td>
<td>Journal of Medical Humanities, 2016 Mar;</td>
<td>TX All Text: bioethics; human identity; mortality</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>A Thematic Analysis of Self-Directed Learning in Shelley's 'Frankenstein'</td>
<td>By: Mendoza, Josef</td>
<td>Dissertations/Thesis</td>
<td>TX All Text: self-education; male characters; first draft: 1816-1817; educational theory; adult education</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Workshop of Filthy Creation: The Theatre Assembled</td>
<td>By: Rae, Paul</td>
<td>TDR: The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies, 2015 Winter;</td>
<td>TX All Text: houses, lights; theatrical adaptation; LeCompte, Elizabeth Alice; Wooster Group; spectator; theatrical production; 2011; Shelley; Mary Wollstonecraft; Frankenstein; Boyle; Danny; National Theatre Live</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Frankenstein's Offspring: Practicing Science and Parenthood in Natali's Splice</td>
<td>By: Schmeink, Lars</td>
<td>Science Fiction Film and Television, 2015 Autumn;</td>
<td>TX All Text: science fiction film; Natali; Vincenzo; monsters; scientific experimentation; parenthood</td>
</tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>[Donna Haraway's Cyborg Feminism and Hybrid Subject: Focusing on the Monster in Frankenstein]</td>
<td>By: Ha, Sujeong</td>
<td>Studies in British and American Language and Literature, 2015 Sept;</td>
<td>TX All Text: Cyborg Feminism; Hybrid Subject; focusing on the monster in Frankenstein</td>
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1980s
Goodson's article deals with the depressive mood of the Romantic period and the 1990s. It looks at the text of Frankenstein and a movie made in the 90s, and suggests that the director, Kenneth Branagh, portrays Frankenstein as a medical student and suicidal. The monster is a product of depression.

Like many articles published in the 1990s, Goodson writes about the relationship between the film and novel. What is unique about it is its focus on depression and its reference to pharmaceuticals in the 90s.
Conclusions
Summary of benefits to researchers:

- Introduces digital humanities method
- Provides contextual information early in the research process
- Sparks curiosity
- Supports hypothesis development
- Compliments close reading
- Teaches database search skills
Are the results a perfect record of all scholarship on a topic?

No.

Activity is designed as a jumping off point for research. Students should be encouraged to critique the tools.
Detailed Methodology (in progress)

Adapted from Bob Nicholson, "Counting Culture; or, How to Read Victorian Newspapers from a Distance," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17.2 (2012): 238-246.

1. **Select a database**
   - Coverage and course subject
   - Quality of metadata and indexing (find database performance research)
   - Prior experience or user friendly

2. **Choose keyword(s) and construct a search**
   - kw accurately identifies idea, person, or place under analysis
   - kw does not return a significant number of irrelevant hits
   - kw is not new or susceptible to linguistic shifts
   - Cautioned use of controlled fields

3. **Gather data**
   - May require series of separate searches
   - Spreadsheet

4. **Plot data**
   - Graphs, maps, timelines, trees, so many options!

5. **Analyze results**
   - Generate questions
   - Identify a manageable sample of texts to be subjected to close reading
Faculty Consultation

• Find faculty on campus who practice DH or have an interest in learning

• Best if lesson is an integrated piece of a class assignment

• Preparing students: DH reading; critical reading; or database training

• Method can be structured to meet the needs of researchers at various academic levels
References


References


