

News Downloads and Aboutness

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Many of us are using LexisNexis, Factiva or other online sources, often in order to study a specific topic within such overall fields as gender studies, journalism, history, sociology, medicine, psychology, law.

Among the issues raised by such downloads as supplied by an online search-engine, there are choice of search-terms, duplicate articles, repeated sections within articles, online comments and discussion, disparities in formatting. But the main aim of the presentation is to focus on the problem of relevance: many of the articles retrieved may have a merely incidental mention of the desired topic.

The main aboutness of such articles doesn't really include the topic but concerns another, quite different one. For example an article returned by a search on Brexit (Guardian, 12 January 2017) which concentrates on problems in the UK's the National Health Service, contrasting these problems incidentally with the "theoretical risks of Brexit" and claims deficiencies in the Health Service are very obvious to ordinary voters. Its aboutness does include Brexit but at a very minor level.

The question we will be considering is then, how do we filter aboutness so as to reduce unwanted dross? There are various aspects of relevance to identify in order to find ways of filtering out irrelevance. One concerns identifying carefully what we are really seeking in the first place, since almost any topic such as climate change, austerity, Brexit has numerous aspects (legal, social, geographical etc.), some of which are more central (within the field of knowledge) than others (gardening, hill-walking, DIY). Once it is clear which aspect of our topic is wanted, means have to be found to get rid of the others. Easier said than done!