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Non-events and nothings: the potential of negatively defined phenomena for information science

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Abstract

Introduction. We tend to research things that are visible and marked rather than those that are not. Unsurprisingly, ‘nothings’—non-things, non-identification, non-presence, non-events, and other ‘negatively defined phenomena’ (Scott, 2018)—are less prevalent in research undertakings and findings. This exploratory conceptual paper examines negatively defined phenomena and how identifying what is ‘nothing’ can expand our understanding of the difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1973). We suggest examining negatively defined phenomena provide an opportunity to broaden our perspective of norms and assumptions and what is given priority as a research topic in the information studies context.

Method + Analysis. Using the case study of Skooliepalooza, a nomadic *ungathering*, we explore non-events as meaningful in their own right. Building on work from Scott (2018, 2019), we consider non-events, dimensions of nothing, with a specific focus on non-identity, and the acts of commission (doing/being non-something) and omission (non-doing/not-being something) that contribute to the ‘reverse marking negative space’ (Scott, 2018, p. 5).

Conclusion. In this short exploratory conceptual paper, we invite thinking about negatively defined phenomena as sites worthy of research in their own right, not necessarily needing the phenomena to be the opposite of the activity or behaviour, but rather that researching things that are ‘non’ are valuable.

Introduction

It is always easier to research things (e.g., ideas, objects, processes, structures, systems, concepts, etc.) that *are*: things that are visible, actions that are taken, that can be followed, traced, identified, and broken down into their component parts. It is unsurprising, then, that ‘nothings’—non-things, non-identification, non-presence, non-events, and other ‘negatively defined phenomena’ (Scott, 2018)—are less prevalent in research undertakings and findings. In this paper, we are interested in exploring the power of identifying what is *nothing* in research phenomena (e.g., transience, invisibility, failure, absence, etc.), and how that informs our understanding of the difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1973). We suggest that examining negatively defined phenomena provide an opportunity to broaden our perspective of norms and assumptions and what is given priority as a research topic in the information studies context.

The following exploratory paper examines the negatively defined phenomena (meaning phenomena that are negatively marked or stated) of *non-events*, considers the various ways to describe and define them, and what that offers information studies research. We apply this to the case study of a nomadic gathering—Skooliepalooza—to examine how non-events are informative and how approaching them as negatively defined phenomena resists pressure to treat ‘non’ phenomena merely as the inverse of an action or behaviour, and instead pay attention to meaningful nothings.

In an article exploring the prefix that connotes the opposite of the term, we find it important to state what this article is *not*: i.e., philosophies of events (e.g., Deleuze, 1993), nothingness (Sartre, 2018), or other non-theories (e.g., non-representational theory, Thrift, 2007). In addition to not feeling equipped to speak to or with these concepts in particular, this is also just an exploratory, short paper meant to plant a seed rather than describe a tree.

Why non-events

Based on an initial literature review, descriptions of non-events, informed by phenomenological conceptualizations of nothing (e.g., absence, lack) or by other time-space considerations (e.g., voids, gaps), fall into three broad categories: 1) something that did not occur: used to identify when ‘anticipated events that either do not materialize or turn into anticlimax’ (Löfgren & Ehn, 2010, p. 5) (e.g., Y2K, Crawford, 2001; Adams, 2001); 2) something mundane, can refer to the repeated, the routine—something so familiar becomes invisible (Löfgren & Ehn, 2010); or 3) something counter to, defined or described in negation of something else.

We are particularly interested in the third category, *something counter to*, because it offers an opportunity to challenge norms and assumptions of identifying information phenomena. Our primary interest is exploring a way to research the non-event, which has not happened but was or is believed to be possible, while still honouring that the lack of something happening. We are influenced by the environmental concept of ‘leave no trace’, holding its significance in what is intentionally absent rather than what is present. Here, ‘nothing is a form of social action’ (Scott, 2019, p. 161); by restoring environments to their original state and minimizing visible impact, humans engage in a form of environmental ‘non-event’. This concept provided the grounding on which the paper is based.

Additionally, considering non-events as negatively defined phenomena could build resistance to framings or impulses to fill gaps and voids. Information studies has tended to describe gaps as voids or nothings that need to be filled or traversed (Belkin et al., 1982; Dervin, 1998). This can lead to extractive framings where information is considered as having commodified value to fill in the gap (cf., Costello & Floegel, 2021; Floegel & Costello, 2022). However, we hope to contribute to recent literature countering this extractive and deficit framing (Gray, 2022; Patin et al., 2020) by taking seriously the possibilities and potential of nothings.

Negatively defined phenomena and non-events in information studies

There is relatively little literature exploring negatively defined phenomena in IS (e.g., avoidance in Soroya et al., 2021), usually integrating them into other descriptions of existing phenomena (e.g., non-use, as in Talja & Maula, 2003). In the context of the academic research community, Talja (2002) describes nonsharing as a phenomenon that involves something that does not exist. More recently, literature has examined non-information, which the authors describe as information that does not exist or the non-existence of information (Huvila et al., 2023, p. 794). They identify gaps as potentially productive, suggesting that ‘sometimes ... non-information can make an equally great or even greater difference’ (Huvila et al., 2023, p. 793). Non-information and information gaps are considered in many contexts, including archaeological documentation, health care, gambling, etc. It is interesting to note that since the Huvila et al., conference publication was of a panel description, the conversation that occurred is only available to those who attended.

Unsurprisingly, the entry point to non-events in information studies is through the topic of events. In the context of information storage and retrieval systems, Buckland and Larson (2007) consider events as having received little attention. In the write up for their poster presentation, events are defined as ‘activities or changes occurring over time’ (Buckland & Larson, 2007, n.p.). Non-events are defined as the antithesis: ‘if there were no change, we would say that it was a non-event’ (Buckland & Larson, 2007, n.p.). The authors discuss encoding and markup of events in general, biographical records, and describe various dualities between events, time, agents, topics, place, and space. Events in this way become marked occurrences transpiring in a particular time and space. In a later work slightly expanding on the poster’s ideas, lack of change is once again used to identify a non-event, ‘and for this reason events cannot be preserved, only described, represented or reenacted’ (Buckland et al., 2009, n.p.). Though Buckland et al. (2009) do not specify the positive or negative aspects of change, expanding non-event to include when it is not necessarily a positive happening (e.g., not trying, not finding out, etc.) could augment understanding (Scott, 2019).

To enrich our understanding of negatively defined phenomena, we turn to examples from sociology and symbolic interactionism (Scott, 2018, 2019). They describe four dimensions of nothing: ‘non-identity; inactivity; absence; and silence’ (Scott, 2018, p. 3). As a full exploration of these dimensions is beyond the scope of this paper, we focus specifically on non-identity, which is described as ‘self-identities that are based on not doing or being certain things’ (Scott, 2018, p. 7). In their paper, Scott and Lockwood (2024) connect non-identity to how we talk about becoming: ‘identities can also be negatively defined by things that we miss, lose, choose against or events that never happened’ (p. 472). Scott offers ways of thinking of these dimensions through the social acts of commission (choosing to avoid doing/being something) and omission (passively neglecting or failing to act) (Scott, 2018, 2019).

In what follows, we have two main objectives: 1) Consider the case study of Skooliepalooza as a non-event as a counter to an ‘official’ event; 2) Examine non-identity and acts of commission and omission to bolster our understanding of a non-event as information science phenomena.

Case study: Skooliepalooza

To exemplify the concept of a non-event, we draw on an ethnographic case study exploring vehicle residents’ information practices. While the larger project encompassed multiple field sites throughout California and Arizona, this excerpt focuses on one field site in particular—the 2024 Skooliepalooza, located in the desert on Bureau of Land Management land, near the California and Arizona border. Data was collected during the event while Author 2 lived in her own vehicle from January 20-27, 2024 through several means, including through participant observation (Lareau, 2021), information horizon interviews (Sonnenwald et al., 2001), guided tours (Thomson, 2018), and photographs of participant’s vehicles and their immediate information spaces (Duneier, 1999; Hartel & Thomson, 2011).

Skooliepalooza is an annual nomadic gathering bringing together the Skoolie (converted school bus) community and other nomadic travellers, including vehicle residents. For long-time Skooliepalooza attendees, the gathering is less a festival than a living neighbourhood, a homecoming where nomads reconnect with chosen family and community and share knowledge, skills, and support. Skoolie is an information sharing event. Topics range from Skoolie conversion tips, solar power systems, and plumbing, to budget travel and off-grid living. Experienced nomads and builders share insights into overcoming challenges in the conversion process and life on the road. The event encourages collaboration, with attendees often helping each other with projects or repairs. Their ethos centres decentralization, mutual aid, and DIY culture—values that resist commodification and see the community itself as the organizer.

However, Skooliepalooza 2024 highlighted a growing rift between an ‘official’ trademarked version of the event—with attempts at permitting, mapped zones, and some centralized oversight—and an ‘unofficial’ or grassroots tradition, where nomads show up and self-organize around a spirit of spontaneity. To bridge this tension, the original community branded the 2024 gathering as an ‘Ungathering’, signalling that it was not a commercial festival, or an event to be commodified or owned by a singular person or entity, but a community-driven convergence meant to preserve the ethos of freedom, autonomy, and shared responsibility. This framing implies a blatant contradiction. While the Ungathering rejects strict hierarchy and ownership, its very name acknowledges that questions of control, legitimacy, and structure are unavoidable as the event and its community grow.

For the organic Skooliepalooza community, they view attempts to trademark or brand Skooliepalooza as a betrayal of its spirit, reducing what was an organic, peer-driven convergence into a curated, identifiable event run by a single, unelected monarch from outside the community who ‘purchased’ the trademark to a community gathering they never attended or experienced. Skooliepalooza is not about hashtags, social media attention, official programming, or commodification, but about veteran community members passing down survival skills, newcomers learning to build their buses, and the collective experiment of self-governing a temporary city in the desert (see Figure 1). This perspective insists that the heart of the gathering lies in its anarchic freedom and non-identity, based on not doing or being a specific thing, where authority is diffuse and openly rejected, creativity is communal, and belonging comes from participation rather than purchase.



Figure 1. Depicts a temporary camp or ‘neighbourhood’ at Skooliepalooza.

The ethic of *Leave No Trace*—or ‘leave it how you found it’—is central to the gathering’s (non)identity. Rooted in environmental stewardship and nomadic respect for shared spaces, this ethos means treating the desert not as a disposable backdrop for a party but as a fragile ecosystem that sustains the community. The philosophy carries a moral weight because nomads depend on access to these wild places and any damage risks stricter enforcement or closures by land managers. *Leave No Trace* functions as both a practical survival strategy and a cultural marker: an ethic that distinguishes Skooliepalooza’s communal, intentional culture from commercial festivals where clean-up is outsourced. Holding each other accountable to this standard affirms the community’s belief that the gathering is not just an event but a collective experiment in living in solidarity with the land. When the annual gathering diffuses, and vehicle residents go their separate ways, what was once a temporary city in the middle of the desert ceases to exist, returning to its nothingness state.

Non-event	Dimensions of nothing	Commission choosing to avoid doing/being something	Omission passively neglect fail to act
counter to	non-identity	choosing to be non something or counter to something: Calling it an Ungathering	non-identification rather than dis-identification: learning what not to do, how not to do
actively chosen		being ex something: former Skoolie participants	
enaction of agency and	not doing or being certain things	constructed never identities- deciding not to do: rejection of the gathering as branded and commodified and of strict hierarchy and ownership	
autonomy			
branded + trademark			

Table 1. Negatively defined phenomena of Skooliepalooza

Skooliepalooza provides an opportunity to think with negatively defined phenomena. Here (see Table 1), the non-event is considered through various dimensions of nothing, as well as acts of commission and omission. The ungathering is a non-event that is counter to the ‘official’ gathering—it is an enaction of agency and autonomy to counter branded and trademarked aspects of Skoolie. Though it is defined negatively (*ungathering*), it is actively chosen (Scott, 2018). The dimension of nothing particularly relevant is non-identity enacted through acts of commission and omission. Skoolie involved not doing or being certain things or choosing to be a ‘non-’ of something. For instance, framing an event as an ungathering or identifying as former Skoolie participants. Such positions reflect the construction of ‘never-identities,’ where individuals or groups define themselves through rejection. For example, countering the commodified or branded forms of gathering, of hierarchies, or of ownership structures. There may also be acts of omission involving non-identification rather than a dis-identification focusing on a process of learning what not to do and how not to do it. It is important to note that negatively defined phenomena were not the focus of the described ethnographic research. We are imposing these dimensions of nothing on the case study to suggest that the exploration of negatively defined phenomena is present even when not specifically sought. We suggest that future ethnographic work could be further enriched by specific focus on non-things, non-identification, non-presence, non-events.

Conclusion

If we were only looking at marks made, we would miss out on ‘leave no trace’. By turning our information studies gaze to the unmarked, the non-things, non-identification, and non-events, we can ‘study the negative space around marked social objects’ (Scott, 2018, p. 6)—what Scott refers to as ‘reverse-marking negative space’ (Scott, 2018, p. 5). Future research may consider other negatively defined phenomena in IS (such as nonsharing or non-use) and their implications for information needs, seeking, use, as well as broadening the exploration to include other dimensions of nothing (i.e., inactivity, absence, and silence). The authors also see great potential connection between the non-event as mundane, and everyday information behaviour (Savolainen, 2023; Ocepek, 2017).

By taking seriously and paying attention to ‘non,’ we can also develop capacities, such as patience and noticing, by emphasizing the understanding that events can change or morph through time and space to hold disparate or multiple definitions or descriptions. This can have implications for counterfactual considerations such as misinformation (i.e., the rhetorical device of proving a negative).

In this short paper, we invite thinking about negatively defined phenomena as a site worthy of research in their own right, not necessarily needing it to be the opposite of the activity or behaviour, but rather that researching things that are ‘non’ are valuable.

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