# The Art of Recognizing What You Ought to Have Wanted to Look For[*]

Andrew Abbott

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**Andrew Abbott:** University of Chicago (United States)

✉ aabbott@uchicago.edu; ⌁ http://home.uchicago.edu/aabbott/

Andrew Abbott teaches at the University of Chicago. Known for studies of the professions, Abbott also pioneered algorithmic analysis of social sequence data. He has written on the foundations of methodology and on the evolution of the social sciences, the academic system, and research libraries. His current projects include books on the future of knowledge and on processual social theory.

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[*] In an email message responding to our request for a contribution to this special feature, Andrew Abbott mentioned several reasons for declining the invitation. One of these was so appropriate to the topic that we have excerpted it here and are publishing it with Professor Abbott's permission. – *The editors*

I've just been in the middle of preparing a big lecture for the university here and so on this invitation I'll need to decline. It's odd, in a way, because one of the ways I *do* get new problems is illustrated by the talk I just gave. The Divinity School asked me to give the Nuveen Lecture, their big lecture for the year. It's kind of a dare: they ask a member of the faculty outside the Divinity School to talk to *them* about religion. But I was asked only in June, when my writing schedule for the Fall Quarter was already all set, because I had decided to teach a seminar on the drafts of my theory book, even though the chapters weren't all done or — in some cases — even started. By committing to teach uncompleted and even unwritten chapters, I was tying myself to the mast, hoping to force myself to finish the entire book manuscript in the fall quarter. But the Divinity School invitation could be used to force me to apply the whole argument to a particular social institution, and to come up with all the reasons why one should follow my theoretical path. So I did it anyway, forcing myself to write for three hours every weekday morning for the first four weeks of the quarter.

And of course it proved extremely helpful. The mere exercise of applying the theory enabled me to wrench it free from its roots in my reactions against aspects of quantitative methodology. Having to cut a quarter of the talk at the last minute taught me what was essential and non-essential. Having to address a lay audience taught me that all the details had to be left out (and should go into footnotes in the book), something I was already learning from teaching the class. (One of the failings of my work has always been that I write at too many levels at once. It makes the texts unreadable, sometimes. But this kind of exercise forced me to a single level).

So one place to get obligations is from outside, to see that you really ought to have wanted to give the talk you have been asked to give. As I said in *Digital Paper*,[1] the art of research on found data from the library or on the internet is not to find things that you want, but to recognize when it is that you have run into something that you ought to have wanted to look for. The answer to every problem is always staring you in the face. But so also are a lot of wrong answers. The art of research is knowing how to tell the difference.

1.   Andrew Abbott (2014), *Digital Paper: a Manual for Research and Writing with Library and Internet Materials*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. The book underscores this point a number of times and in various contexts — both specific ones like reading and document search, and more general ones like conceptualization and problem structure. See pp. xii, 1, 24, 30, 91, 104, 140, and 245. [We are grateful to Professor Abbott for providing these bibliographic details. *The editors.*]