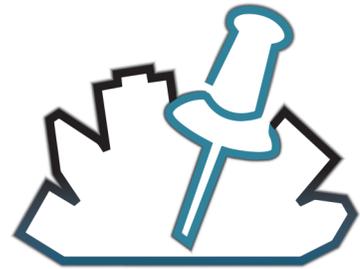


# Geothink



Geothink Canada Newsletter | Issue 11

August 2016

## Reporting back from our Summer Institute 2016

This issue is a special report on our recently concluded Summer Institute held in Toronto. Geothink concluded its second Summer Institute, hosted by the Ryerson University School of Urban and Regional Planning, with even higher student attendance this year. Students were, once again, able to meet, share ideas, and learn from each other. A group of Geothink students also got together for our first Writing Retreat, an event we hope to hold again. After the Summer Institute, Geothink co-applicants and partners met at the University of Toronto for our Annual General Meeting, where researchers gave progress updates and planned future collaborations and output.

Special thanks go to Dr. Pamela Robinson and Dr. Leslie Shade for hosting us at Ryerson University and the University of Toronto for the Summer Institute, Writing Retreat, and AGM.

We also highlight the recent passing of one of our colleagues, Geothink co-applicant Dr. Alexander Aylett of the Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS).

*Peck Sangiambut*  
Editor



Students received lectures on open data metrics



And participated in a writing workshop



Summer Institute attendees at Ryerson University's School of Urban Planning

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# Geothink Summer Institute 2016

Thirty five students from across Canada attended this year's Summer Institute at Ryerson University's School of Urban and Regional Planning to learn about *The Value of Open Data*.

How does one begin tackling an issue such as valuation of open data? First, students had to be acquainted with data in the first place. Because of the incredible breadth in students' backgrounds, there was a whole range of skills in the room. We had some students with a high degree of familiarity with data management, programming, and quantitative analysis. Complementing them, we had students with backgrounds in critical studies and qualitative analysis. This proved both a challenge and opportunity for organisers—how do we create a three day educational experience that can cater to those without quantitative or programming backgrounds, yet keep it engaging for those that do?

## Day 1: Open Data with the Iron Chef

Fortunately, we were able to draw upon the expertise of Toronto's 'Open Data Iron Chef', Richard Pietro of OGT Productions. Richard is a local Toronto open government advocate, but his advocacy work has lead him across the entirety of Canada (twice) to promote open government principles in communities. Richard led Day 1 of the Summer Institute on what he terms an iron chef experience, by walking students through data and examples of applications and analyses that illustrate some of the potential that open data embodies. James Steenberg, a Geothink post doctoral fellow working with Professor Pamela Robinson at Ryerson University, led an afternoon session that delved deeper into data and

quantitative analysis, with a particular focus on the characteristics of data that would enable certain types of analysis and transformations. The day ended with students presenting their own proposals for open data applications, accompanied by their own gap analysis which identified problems that required data to be opened as a requisite for the development of a solution. Students identified gaps through a close examination of existing open datasets and their individual characteristics.

For further reporting on Day 1, see: <http://geothink.ca/cooking-up-open-data-with-the-iron-chef-summer-institute-day-1/>

## Day 2: Approaches to Valuing Open Data

For the second day, students were treated to a morning of lectures from Geothink co-applicants: Peter Johnson, Pamela Robinson, Teresa Scassa, and Renee Sieber. Each spoke of their own approaches to valuing open data. Dr.

Johnson (University of Waterloo) talked about his own research involving local municipal governments and their internal approaches to open data metrics. Dr. Robinson (Ryerson University) spoke on the value of open data from a civic perspective, particularly at the community level in Toronto. Dr. Scassa (University of Ottawa) gave a talk on the role of the law in opening up data and unlocking potential value. Dr. Sieber closed off the morning with a synthesis of the methods for evaluating open data.

In the afternoon, students were treated to a panel discussion comprised of a former Open Data Lead at the City of Toronto and current Geothink partner (Keith McDonald), the co-founder and CEO of ThinkDataWorks (Bryan Smith), two representatives from Geothink partner The Neptis Foundation (Marcy Burchfield and Vishan Guyadeen), and two Geothink students (Dawn Walker and Curtis McCord). The panel members gave 15 minute presentations on how open data was important to their organisations, how they use open data, and



James Steenberg, Richard Pietro, and Geothink students discussing a data-centric problem and solutions via open data applications

what gaps they saw in the provision of open data that need to be addressed so citizens and business may fully benefit from an open government and access to government data. Common issues emerged, such as a lack of data standards and inconsistency in open data provision between municipal and national scales. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions of the panellists and receive insight into government, non-profit/advocacy, and business approaches to open data. Students then took part in a debate exercise that placed them in the role of organisations

similar to our panel.

For further reporting on Day 2, see: <http://geothink.ca/measuring-the-value-of-open-government-data-summer-institute-day-2/>

**Day 3: Writing Workshop**

Our third and final day of the Summer Institute was a change of tack. Ryerson School of Journalism Professors April Lindgren (also a Geothink partner) and Ann Rauhala gave a highly informative workshop on non-academic writing. In their talk, they emphasised the need for

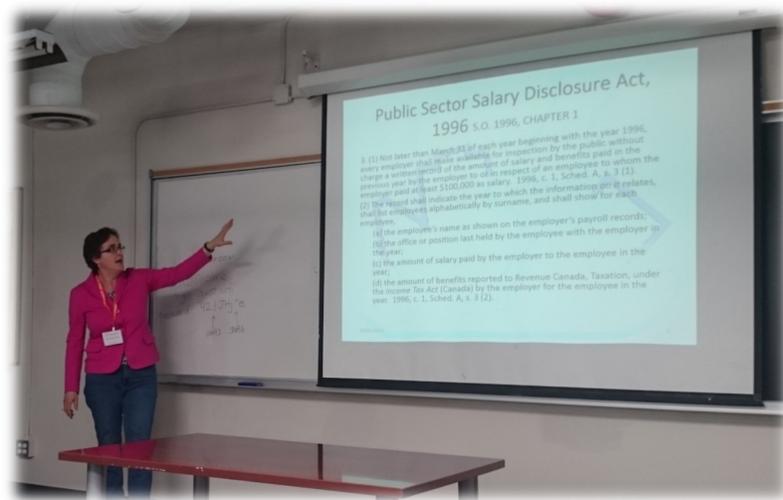
academics to reach out to those outside of academia. Research can be at its most impactful when it reaches a mainstream audience, especially those who are in the position to act upon academic council. Drs. Lindgren and Rauhala entreated students to think about their individual disciplines and what kind of messages they think are important to convey to the public. Students went through training on writing for newspapers, especially in opinion columns or op-eds, where they had to condense an issue around open data down to several hundred words. Through techniques in word play and grammar, students were crafting engaging stories around open data while keeping their ideas simple and concise. Students left the Summer Institute with a better understanding of the different academic and sectoral approaches to open data, and how to convey their own thoughts on the topic to the public. We hope this will help our students engage others, including our Geothink partners, in their research.

For further reporting on Day 3, see: <http://geothink.ca/out-of-the-ivory-tower-conveying-open-data-research-to-the-general-public-summer-institute-day-3/>

We would like to thank all those involved in the planning, teaching, and panel discussions for the Summer Institute, especially our Geothink partners and non-Geothink participants. We welcome your involvement in future events.



Students pitched their ideas for open data applications and identified gaps in data provision and data quality



Dr. Teresa Scassa (University of Ottawa) giving a legal perspective on open data valuation via instruments such as the Public Sector Salary Disclosure Act of 1996

**SUMMER INSTITUTE 2017**

We are excited to announce that next year's Geothink Summer Institute will be held in Montreal.

We look forward to seeing you there!

# Geothink Student Writing Retreat

*Written by Suthee (Peck) Sangiambut and Tenille Brown*

*Directly after the Summer Institute, a group of eight Geothink students met over the course of two days, at the University of Toronto's Bissell Building, to discuss and write a collaborative, interdisciplinary journal article. Thank you to Dr. Leslie Shade for coordinating the work arrangements.*

Over the past couple of years, Geothink students at the Undergraduate, Master's and PhD level have had the opportunity to get together for conference meetings and summer institutes. We have had enriching discussions about issues common to Geothink and each has offered insights from our respective disciplinary backgrounds. But as part of this process we have often noticed that assumed common terms mean different things to someone in political science, compared to GIS Science, and compared again to law. Perhaps this is no surprise given that part of Geothink's mandate is to carry out interdisciplinary research with many researchers who have different training and backgrounds. When the idea for a potential writing retreat was suggested at last year's (2015) AGM, students volunteered to take the first step toward a writing project that focused on interdisciplinary research.

Students on the project had a series of winter meetings to discuss what working on an interdisciplinary meeting meant for them. As students considered how an interdisciplinary writing project may look, it quickly became clear that each person's respective disciplinary training affected the knowledge, perceptions and ideas about a given geothink issue. In particular, it was identified that

even basic terms in our vocabularies were being interpreted and applied differently. In one of our meetings, Tenille E. Brown, a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Law at the University of Ottawa, asked us what "open" and "data" mean. From a legal perspective, both open and data are quite fuzzy terms, whereas geographers can have much clearer distinctions, such as between "data" and "information". In order to work through these perspectives students agreed to begin a writing project on 'keywords' that are used in the Geothink grant. The aim is to identify particular keywords that may be contentious, but are essential to Geothink research and important to each discipline, and to then collaborate on a paper highlighting these differences.

*"The Writing Retreat was a great space to really engage in meaningful discussion with those from a completely different background. Having a relaxed, informal setting and plenty of time meant that the Writing Retreat was a great opportunity to bridge divides between disciplines. I appreciated the opportunity to see how those across the table were tackling exactly the same task from a very different perspective. My own interest is in breaking down these different disciplines and trying to draw out whatever similarities or trends I can. This project could help us talk to each other in much more certain terms, and break out of academic silos."* (Peck Sangiambut)

The student driven project, led by Tenille E. Brown, began in earnest in a two-day writing retreat at the University of Toronto in June. The first day consisted of discussion of concepts and planning of the structure of the paper. Law students and geography students locked horns over issues such as "are we talking about process", "what is data", and how to define certain concepts. The geographers in the room were pleasantly surprised to find out that an actual dictionary (Black's Law Dictionary) can be a helpful tool for legal research and in practice. Students, broadly grouped into 'geography' and 'law', discussed how each of their disciplines creates and agrees upon definitions. In law, this is often through court cases and legislation (putting definitional power generally outside the realm of academia) and tends to result in more consistent interpretations. In geography, definitions can come from both academic and mainstream literature, and are multitudinous and competing.

*"For me, the writing retreat was one of those moments where I sat back and said to myself "I have the best job in the world!" It was an intellectual, safe, and often humorous space full of lively conversation and creative writing. The Writing Retreat achieved far more than writing; we fostered strong academic synergies and friendships that, I certainly hope, will lead to productive research partnerships."* (Victoria Fast)

Our second day consisted of further discussion, and a writing session where we split off into our keyword groups. We identified four keywords which we believe are contentious, important to our individual disciplines and of central importance to Geothink as a collective. These key words are: **Open**, **Data**, **Access**, and **Web 2.0**. The aim is to consider these terms from our respective disciplines and identify the commonalities and differences in how we use them. During day two we also agreed that the overarching objective of the writing project was to explore these keywords under the umbrella of 'open data', a key concept within Geothink research. We believed that this approach would enable us to consider how these terms influence not only ones disciplinary approach to open data, but also in turn, how these perspectives can influence the concept of 'open data' itself.

After a successful two days of intense discussion and writing, the students went back to their bases and are working collaboratively online to further develop our work on interdisciplinarity. As we contin-

ue to work through these issues it is clear that without an understanding of a colleague's perspective or use of a particular term, academics find it difficult to talk across these disciplinary divides. The Geothink grant is an exciting opportunity to tackle these ideas, as we are connected with fellow student researchers in many different departments and faculties. We hope to present the fruits of this first Writing Retreat and collaborative student-led project soon.

We considered this a successful inaugural Geothink Writing Retreat, and hope next year will afford a similar opportunity for students. If students have any questions on the experience of the writing retreat, please do not hesitate to contact Tenille E. Brown ([Tenille.Brown@uottawa.ca](mailto:Tenille.Brown@uottawa.ca)) or Suthee Sangiambut (Peck) ([suthee.sangiambut@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:suthee.sangiambut@mail.mcgill.ca)). If you have an idea for a collaborative project that requires a face-to-face interaction in the form of a writing retreat, please contact Sonja Solomun ([sonja.solomun@mcgill.ca](mailto:sonja.solomun@mcgill.ca)).

*This Geothink writing project is inspired by the work of Bernard Williams, "Keywords: a Vocabulary of Society and Culture." The Keywords student-writing group thank Professors Elizabeth F. Judge and Leslie Shade who introduced students to the work of Williams and provided further information on completing a writing assignment using the Williams format (respectively).*

*"The Writing Retreat achieved far more than writing; we fostered strong academic synergies and friendships that, I certainly hope, will lead to productive research partnerships."*



The Keywords student-writing group at The University of Toronto's Faculty of Information, May 2016

# In Memoriam: Dr. Alexander C. E. Aylett



This is an abridged version of Drew Bush's post on the Geothink website. Please visit [geothink.ca](http://geothink.ca) for the [full memorial post](#) and his [last podcast](#) with us.

Geothink Co-Applicant Alexander C.E. Aylett passed away on July 23, 2016 from cancer. A beloved son, husband and father, colleagues also remember him for his warmth and passion. His research empowered urban communities to engage with sustainable development through the use of digital technologies and open data.

His wife Luna, their two daughters, Inara and Aurora, her father Richard and his wife Claire, and his two brothers, Chris and Andrew, survive him.

"It's a real loss to the community of people who want smart cities to help improve sustainability and environmental issues," Geothink Co-Applicant [Pamela Robinson](#), associate professor in Ryerson University's [School of Urban and Regional Planning](#), said.

"Alex was trying to make these ideas stick between the [\[Massachusetts Institute of Technology\] CoLab](#) and through [ÉcoHackMtl](#)," she added. "He really wanted to do research that mattered and that made a difference. And to try to bridge the gap between academy and practice. So he was pushing forward on new work."

Aylett's research interrogated how cities' use of digital technology, citizen-sensors, and open data could allow local communities, government leaders and private businesses to manage urban areas more sustainable. One outcome driven by these new mediums for exchanging information has been an enhanced capacity of cities to use citizens and resources to strategically tackle issues such as climate change.

"Alex was a wonderful person—intense, caring, and insightful into how to derive practical political solutions to urban sustainability," Geothink Head [Renee Sieber](#), [associate professor in McGill University's Department of Geography and School of Environment](#), said. "He brought hackers, politicians, and environmentalists together to solve environmental and social problems through consensus and the pragmatic building of networks."

Aylett joined the [Institut national de la recherche scientifique \(INRS\)](#) in July 2015 but had been actively pursuing research on these issues as a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow at MIT. Since 2009, he had published 12 papers with his most recent book chapter entitled "Relational Agency and the Local Governance of Climate Change: International Trends and an American Exemplar" in *The Urban Climate Challenge: Re-thinking the Role of Cities in the Global Climate Regime*.

He earned a master's in comparative literature (2004) followed by a doctorate in human geography (2011) both from the University of British Columbia. At INRS, he was actively recruiting a new masters and doctoral student to join his research team. He firmly believed in partnership-based research, writing in his advertisements for students that "It makes for

stronger research, and reduces the gap between research and action."

His absence will also be deeply felt by the many communities where he led projects, particularly as the founder and co-director of [ÉcoHackMtl](#).

"In a way, you could say his work already lives on by the fact the he was a part of a range of different stakeholders that were looking for ways to innovate using open data," said Jean-Noé Landry, executive director of [Open North](#). Landry collaborated closely with Aylett on several projects including [ÉcoHackMtl](#) and had supervised one of his graduate students at Open North.

"The values that bind us together are those that really kind of enable us to find strength in achieving our collective vision," Landry added after describing values he shared with Aylett about open data and better governance. "And so, the fact is that we need to have leaders that step up, and put this stuff forward, and put in the time, and drive change. But we're stronger when we're empowering those around us."

"That's really at the core of the open data community. So, yes, we are losing a leader but I think his leadership was such that he was able to bring in more people to talk about the potential of data, to talk about potential innovation, to talk about the seriousness of urban sustainability issues and the potential of open data to resolve those issues. I think carrying that vision forward—obviously let's not forget him. But we share the goals he advocated."

# Recent Publications

## Publications are listed in alphabetical order

- Cochrane, L., Corbett, J., Evans, M., & Gill, M. (2016). Searching for Social Justice in GIScience Publications. *Cartography and Geographic Information Science*. DOI: [10.1080/15230406.2016.1212673](https://doi.org/10.1080/15230406.2016.1212673)
- Lu, Q., & Johnson, P. A. (2016). Characterizing New Channels of Communication: A Case Study of Municipal 311 Requests in Edmonton, Canada. *Urban Planning*. 1(2). 18-31. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/up.v1i2.621>
- Robinson, P. J., & Johnson, P. A. (2016). Civic Hackathons: New Terrain for Local Government-Citizen Interaction?. *Urban Planning*, 1(6), 65-74. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/up.v1i2.627>
- Sangiambut, S., & Sieber, R. (2016). The V in VGI: Citizens or Civic Data Sources. *Urban Planning*. 1(2). 141-154. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/up.v1i2.644>
- Scassa, T. (2016). Police Service Crime Mapping as Civic Technology: A Critical Assessment. *International Journal of E-Planning Research*. 5(3). 13-26. <http://137.122.14.44/handle/10393/35042>
- Sieber, R., Robinson, P., Johnson, P. A., & Corbett, J. M. (2016). Doing Public Participation on the Geoweb. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*. 106(5). 1030-1046. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2016.1191325>
- Tenney, M., & Sieber, R. (2016). Data-Driven Participation: Algorithms, Cities, Citizens, and Corporate Control. *Urban Planning*, 1(2), 101-113. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/up.v1i2.645>
- Zhang, S., & Feick, R. (2016). Understanding Public Opinions from Geosocial Media. *ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information*. 5(6). 74. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijgi5060074>

# Geothink Research Themes

## Theme 1: Anywhere, Anyone, Anytime

We believe that the Web 2.0 and its associated technologies will dramatically shift the way cities talk to their constituents and others. People can communicate with cities from anywhere, outside of a jurisdiction, and at any time, for example, which means outside formal venues like city council meetings. Anonymity implies that you do not know the identity of the contributor. This challenges traditional definitions of community, citizen, and participation. We will evaluate the processes of technology development and that impact on its city and the citizen.

## Theme 2: Spatial Authenticity, Accuracy, and Standards

The moment you bring up volunteered geographic information (VGI) (e.g., with Open 311), you worry about the quality of data. This theme considers questions of data structures, standards, and documentation practices used by public agencies. The research produced also aims to develop consensus on terminology, data standards, and dissemination regarding the opening up of government data and acceptance of VGI.

## Theme 3: Laws, Norms, Rights and Code

Data related to governance is not simply a technical matter. Issues that are policy-related and legal in nature will be a primary focus as we try to understand the way Geoweb 1) fits within existing laws and policy, and 2) shapes new policies and law. Specific legal domains of interest are privacy, intellectual property, access to information, access to justice, and the interplay between norms, codes and technology with regards to governance.

## Theme 4: Open Everything

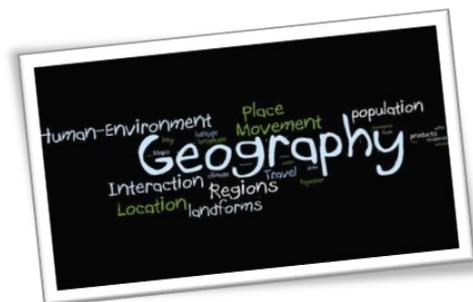
We will track municipal open data engagement over time, theorize about the impacts of open data on governance, and understand and develop best practices. We also have the opportunity to document these approaches and track the evolution of open data practices over time.

## Theme 5: Social Justice

We will explore aspects of Geoweb – Society relationships as they pertain to social justice. We will identify the success and failures of Geoweb for community development. Using a case study approach we will employ participatory research to identify emerging concepts of place, the intersection of community, engagement and social justice, and accessibility to the Geoweb.

## Theme 6: Geoweb Political Economy

This theme will focus on understanding the political economy of the Geoweb as it concerns ownership structures, institutions, and policies. Power relationships between actors and processes of inclusion and exclusion among social media owners and users also will be our focus.



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*H3A 3R8*

**Your participation in Geothink**

For us to have the broadest impact with Geothink, we would greatly appreciate your input. This can mean providing monthly contributions to our social media outlets, writing blog posts, research updates, and being involved in future events. If you wish to be involved in our media output, please contact the editor or our digital journalist.

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