

# From Here To: Everyday Wayfinding in the Age of Google Maps

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## ABSTRACT

Today, asking for directions is often associated with “asking” a mobile mapping application like Google Maps. Google Maps is one of the most popular applications for mobile devices with over 1 billion users per month. What does everyday wayfinding look like in the age of digital mapping and locative media? My doctoral research is a creative and critical look at the everyday information seeking and sense-making practices of urban wayfinding within conditions of mobile mapping platforms. I approach this line of inquiry using exploratory arts-based research methods, specifically spontaneous drawing and performance. In this capacity, I walked the streets of four cities, asking passers-by for directions, requesting the passerby draw out their recommended route using the paper and pen I provided. I selected Toronto, New York, Amsterdam, and London as my urban contexts based on their different topographies and English-language proficiencies. The directions I asked for were to and from preselected sites such as shopping areas, transit hubs, civic squares, local parks, and public libraries. In total, I engaged in 220 directional encounters (55 per city) resulting in 220 hand-drawn route maps, with corresponding fieldnotes and selected interviews. I analyzed my data based on Visual Grounded Theory, an iterative analytical process that works across the different data types and connects to the data’s social modalities.

The mobile digital map was often used to “double-check” spoken directions, to “show” me the way, or to determine the “best route.” Wayfinding through the city was also made legible through the city’s physical forms and infrastructures such as the tramlines and roadways, as well as qualitative descriptions and features of different locations. In addition, these encounters revealed how embodied information practices are presented and represented when describing how to get from A to B. Findings show the complexity of everyday wayfinding, negotiated through the tacit and material forms of technological interventions, urban configurations, and information affects. My research provides methodological insight into arts-based methods in information studies, situating the drawing event at the thresholds of information spaces and civic sites. My analysis and findings result in an empirically-informed theoretical framework by which to critically approach the information practice of urban wayfinding. This framework can be further applied to investigate the spatial and temporal values Google Map’s promotes in relation to the everyday information practices of street-level navigation.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

research methods; mobile systems; ubiquitous computing; information seeking; information use; information literacy; political economy of the information society

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

wayfinding; everyday information practice; sense-making; arts-based research; Google Maps; mobile maps; Visual Grounded Theory; the city