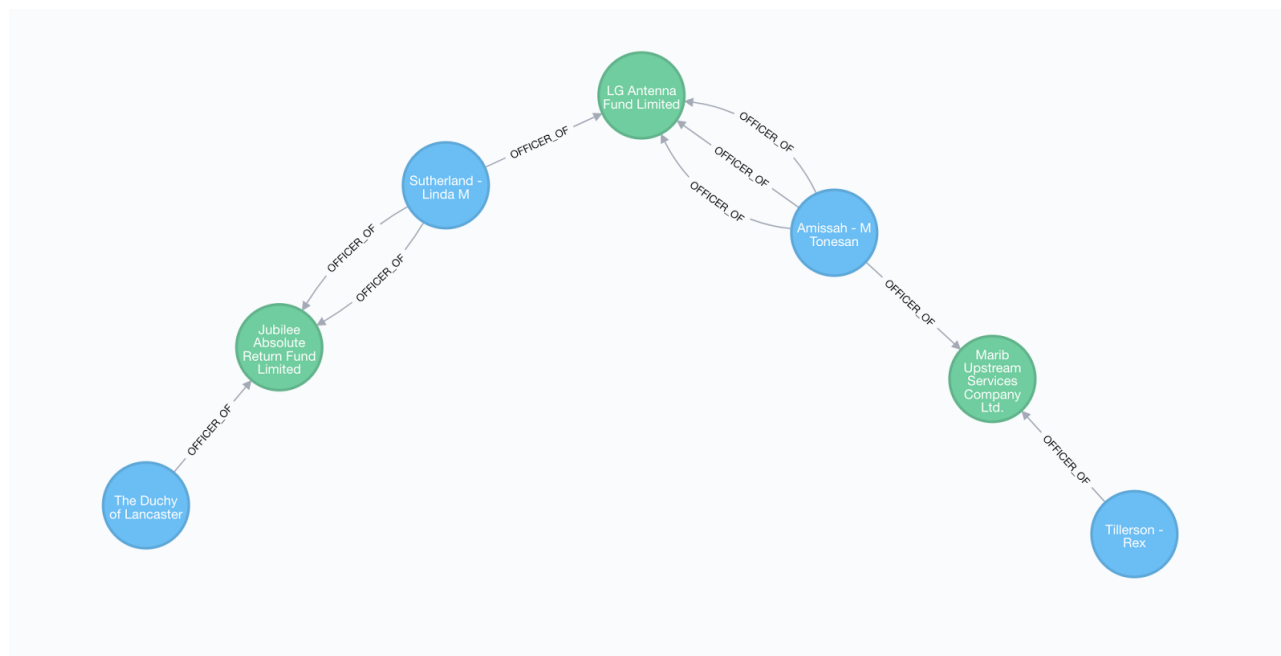


# Seeing like a diagram

The graph as a tool/site for critical investigation and speculative imagination.



*'This shows us a single shortest path connecting the Queen of England and Rex Tillerson [US Secretary of State]. The path goes through several offshore entities and officers with connections to these entities'.*

## Context/Background

The recent investigations based on leaked documents (eg. Panama and Paradise Papers) by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) involved a global network of journalists collaborating to find stories in huge troves of 'unstructured' data: emails, reports, tax returns, and many more. To do this they relied on graph databases, a very flexible way to construct and analyse datasets using only two elements: nodes and relationships. This way of storing data enabled them to quite literally "connect the dots" between, for example, hundreds of shell companies sharing a single postal address, or "paths" leading from offshore accounts to public figures.

Beyond their use in journalism, graphs are an increasingly popular way of processing the world as 'big' data. Companies such as Facebook construct social graphs that connect people, places, high schools, web pages, products, music, and/or films, to target advertising. As part of the imaginary of big data—that the bigger the haystack the more needles we will find—the universal and simple language of graphs promises to make the world readable. As everything from biology to society, from Shakespeare's tragedies to Game of Thrones, is seen as a network of nodes, graphs become a kind of computational metaphor for the world.

Although they are often too large to be seen in their entirety, the structure of graph databases is of course inherently visual. This makes them interesting to us designers, as we can follow these diagrams to bigger questions such as: what is the role of graphs as computational metaphors? Which stories can, and can't, be told through data? What happens in the gaps, in the spaces between the nodes and edges?

In this project we will take data structures as a starting point for critical explorations, using graphs as a format to construct, extract, and communicate narratives.

## **Brief**

You will construct your own graph database to investigate a world or site (actual or fictional) of your choosing. We will look at examples such as Neo4j (the database used by the ICIJ) but yours may take any format you like; from an actual database to a physical 'crazy wall'. You will use this over the course of the project to map your knowledge as it grows: protagonists, locations, events, and so on. From there you will find ways to 'extract' narratives, and to materialise them as documents, photographs, videos, or any other format. At the end of the project you will present both elements, the graph and story(ies), and reflect on their relationship.

You will be working in groups of 3 or 4 people, so it is important that you think about about a strategy to divide the work. This can evolve as needed in the different stages of the project, but you should find a way to document how you work (maybe an opportunity for more diagrams?) as you will be expected to reflect on your collaboration as part of the final hand in.

## **Schedule**

- Week 1: Identify a site and a database format  
09/01/2018: Brief launch, DB practice presentation  
11/01: Round-table (AM) and tutorials (PM)
- Week 2: Populating the database, narrative extraction tests  
15/01: Round-table (AM) and tutorials (PM)  
17/01: Tutorials (AM/PM)  
18/01: Presentations of early results and plans for development
- Project Development: ±5 weeks
- Final Presentation: 22/02/2018 (to be confirmed)

## **Required Reading/Viewing**

The project reader contains articles, videos, and references relating to the brief and context above. You can access it with this link:

<https://are.na/david-benque-1509961916/seeing-like-a-diagram>