

How can the Study of Documentation Processes and Documents Help Libraries, Archives and Museums?

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Abstract. Libraries, archives and museums share a focus on objects that are seen to inform human beings in particular ways. This paper wished to show how this focus makes these disciplines not only amendable to studies of documentation, but also how such studies can potentially achieve beneficial and useful results for these communities. The paper ends with summaries of the studies conducted to illustrate how each of the benefits may be realized by a research approach that highlights documents and documentation processes.

Documentation Studies

It is likely that Paul Otlet (1868 to 1944) was the first to study documents in a systematic way (Lund 2009). A wealthy architect and businessman, Otlet envisioned a memory for mankind that could stave off a repeat of the First World War. Otlet's vision was to create a universal book using the latest office technology of the time – index cards. He believed that individual facts should be extracted from printed material and stored on index cards ready for researchers from around the world to use in their own work. He actually embarked on this project, buying an old building in Brussels to store the ever growing collection of cards he and his assistants produced (the Mundaneum). The advent of the Second World War of course shattered Otlet's dream, both figuratively and literally as the Nazis occupied the Mundaneum and he died a broken man in 1944.

Otlet was not the only individual concerned with documents in the early years of the 20th century (Maack 2004). Working in Paris, Suzanne Briet published in 1951 a tract on documentation in which she developed a succinct definition of document as “a proof in support of a fact.” Unlike Otlet's reticent acceptance of non-print materials as documents, this definition of Briet's explicitly welcomed them. To show how far this welcome extended, Briet developed the example of the antelope. In this example, she distinguished between the antelope in the wild, which was not a document and the antelope in the zoo which was. The difference? The zoo animal was specifically “created” to be studied and examined; it produced evidence that could be used to develop facts about antelopes.

Briet also distinguished between initial documents and secondary documents (catalogs, sound recordings, monographs, articles about antelopes) that require interpretation. For Briet it was the documentalist's job to produce many of these secondary documents.

Documentation studies were sidelined, especially in the Anglo-American world, by the increasing use of the term information and information science in the 1960s and 1970s. This involved a shift in focus from an object to an essence, from the concrete presence of antelopes, books, and video recordings to the ethereal, abstract notion of information which became something of a universal, undefinable substance. What is information? illicits probably more than forty different definitions, even today.

But documentation studies were not completely buried. It lived on in the social sciences where figures like Karl Mannheim, Harold Garfinkel, and Dorothy Smith built theories of documentary practice that showed how documents were an integral part of social life.

And in the 1990s, documentation resurfaced in both Europe and North America. In Europe, the University of Tromsø in Norway opened a school of documentation to help develop the newly established Norwegian National Library (Lund 2008). In North America, scholars such as Bernd Frohmann, Michael Buckland and Ron Day (Buckland 1997; Day 2001; Frohmann 2004) began to explore the earlier history of documentation as well as use the notion of document to critique prevailing concepts of information and the dominant paradigm of information science more generally, especially in light of the information age ideology prevalent at the time.

Benefits of a Documentation Approach

There is much to find favour with in a documentation approach. By switching the focus from information to document, we move from a world of abstraction and essence to one of concrete specificity. Documents have a material nature whereas information does not. Making the switch therefore grounds us in the material world and literally forces us to start asking questions about how documents are constructed and what is done with them afterwards. This has several distinct advantages.

Let us take science journals as an example. Scientific information is considered the best available to human minds, it is seen as the epitome of scholarly work. As a by-product of this reverence, scientific journals share in this exalted position, being seen as symbols of science in fact. We exhort our students and the general public whenever possible to consult these databases of oracular wisdom without much thought as to the humble document itself – the journal article. If we turn our attention to its concrete materiality we find some surprising things. To help with this task I turn to Bruno Latour (1987), who has extensively examined how scientists work. And central to his account are scientific journals. But in the world uncovered by Latour, scientists do not really read journal articles for their informative value; for the information they supposedly contain. Instead they use the articles or rather the citations to the articles as elements with which to build a defense of their own work. Citations and by extension, the author's of those citations become allies in a war of persuasion. Just as in the world of armies and warfare, allies make one stronger; being alone on the battlefield is a recipe for defeat.

As soon as we start to look at scientists as soldiers fighting wars, something important happens. From the pinnacle of human achievement, from a perception that scientists are objective, motivated merely by a quest to find the truth about nature, they fall back into the sorry ranks of the rest of humanity, struggling to persuade their peers that they have the right answer.

(If there is time I will also develop the following themes: that journal articles do not give enough information to replicate the study they describe; that they studiously avoid mentioning the false leads (being rather a constructed narrative as opposed to a literal portrayal of events); that they are not a history of what happened, but a reconstruction; in other words, they are the output of a literary game or technique called by some scholars who have studied scientific work virtual witnessing).

Perhaps the debasing of scientists seems a little cruel, but if it might be cruel, it is also empowering for the rest of us. Science becomes not a quest for truth, but a quest to amass allies to persuade others of the truth. But if this is the case it is acceptable to criticize science and scientists. They do not have a monopoly on truth and they themselves are not sure of what truth is. This in turn opens the way for a renewed appreciation of alternative ways of knowing, not because they have any more ultimate truth value than science, but because they serve particular, useful functions for people more generally.

It is to people that we turn to again in my next example, medical records, for if I wished to show how a focus on documents could be empowering I want to add to this by showing how their study also remind us of the human agency that lies behind their creation and use. Today we take for granted the sight of our doctors scribbling notes as they ask us questions about the illnesses that trouble us. We also approach with ease the lab reports that are the result of blood and other tests. But if we study these documents we discern that they have a history, that they are not static identities, but in fact forms that change over time as a result of human agency.

The work of Marc Berg and Paul Harterink (2004) is illuminating in this regard. They tell us that in the late 19th century and even the early 20th century, doctors wrote notes quite differently than they do today. In those days, medical histories were not segregated by patient, but instead consisted of a linear narrative of the doctor's work day. The work practices in which these notes were involved were also quite different, being used not for clinical diagnosis and monitoring, but for teaching and research.

Two powerful social forces were at work at this time. To begin with, the American College of Surgeons (ACS), the professional association for doctors in the United States was attempting to strengthen the profession by imposing a certain rigour on the practices of its members that would in effect exclude non-members. But the ACS would have settled for any form note-taking process, as long as doctors systemically made and used notes for clinical purposes. It was another social force entirely that imprinted the new form of the medical record -- medical record librarians and hospital officials. These individuals were acting under the impetus of the scientific management school of thought that was sweeping American industry in the early decades of the 20th century as a response to the work of Taylor and Ford. In fact, doctors were soon heavily criticized by the evangelists of scientific record-keeping as they lost control of the tasks to these other occupational groups.

But although of great concern to doctors, this aspect had more profound effects. By moving from a diary centred approach to one based on a patient case file, increasingly complex medical procedures, tests, and investigations could be coordinated and brought to bear on the body of the patient. Case files allowed for the birth of the modern hospital even as it reminds us of the importance of human agency in structuring documents.

Today as we continue the seemingly inexorable march to digitalization, we need to keep this in the forefront of our minds. Digitalization may appear to be about the ethereal production of information, but it is more the creation of new documentary forms. What social forces drive these new forms? Why are they doing so? Who wins and who loses from their production? Can/should we intervene in this site of almost invisible social struggle? How can we do so? These are questions that a study of digital documentation highlights right from the start.

Documents can also help the professional project of LIS and allied disciplines. MacDonald (1995) and others who have studied the professions note that they are one means among many (guilds, trade unions) to create a special status for particular kinds of labour; a status which translates into economic reward and social power. As well as the need to create a community around the occupation through associations and journals, another key strategy is to develop a body of theoretical knowledge. Practical knowledge is not sufficient as it too easily may be labelled as common-sense or technical and relegated to lesser paid para-professional groups. Now in regard to a theoretical base of knowledge, LIS is woefully inadequate as noted by a number of scholars (Frohmann 2004; Ennis 1967; Budd 2001; Pierce 1992). A focus on documentation and perhaps the creation of a theory or theories of documentation could help alleviate this lack to some extent.

The study of documents provides a fertile ground for interesting studies as documents are ubiquitous in modern human societies, but so rarely studied. It would therefore also help the field of information science to carve out its own distinctive domain of expertise, instead of having to share with computer science, management studies and assorted other fields.

The Norwegian University of Tromso sets an example in this regard (Lund 2008). Established in 1996, it focused from the beginning on documentation studies which the faculty defined as a comparative approach that asked the following questions: who made the document? What kinds of means are used? In which ways are they means used? What does the document actually document?

Such an approach if situated alongside Frohmann's exhortation to study documents as part of material work practices has the potential to create a rich, independent theoretical foundation upon which to build a professional identity and project.

Conclusion

What I have presented here is a case for information science and allied disciplines to take the study of documentation as a central feature of their work. Doing so would be a useful step in developing the professional project of the discipline, but also a way to contribute more widely to society through forms of empowerment and exposure of the human agency behind what appears on the surface as technical givens. These are all worthy tasks indeed.

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