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The Document: A Multiple Concept

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Introduction

Since Suzanne Briet (1951/2006), the notion of the document has been considered in terms of the user.¹ Indeed, we can say the use *makes* the document; the document only exists as a document because a user needs it to prove or explain something. The link between document and information gets stronger as the number of documents increases. The definition of document moves towards the definition of use: the use creates the document. The document is at the same time object and sign; it exists because a user needs it to demonstrate, explain, teach, educate, learn something. In this paper, we will attempt to show how the concept of document gradually developed in France, particularly through the writings of Robert Escarpit and Jean Meyriat. These French scholars are not well known in the Anglophone literature; making them known to English-speaking scholars can maybe improve mutual, global understanding and progress. After Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet (from the library world), Jean Meyriat and Robert Escarpit² (from the social sciences) elaborate a theory of the document for university research in Information and Communication Science.³ We will explore how the document evolved from a simplistic notion to a fully-fledged concept that connotes a meaningful social construction.

1. A notion becomes a concept

1.1 Robert Escarpit: The document as “traces” for building knowledge

At their outset as disciplines in France, the information sciences and communication sciences explored the notion of the document and eventually began to regard the document as a concept. As the document becomes a subject of study in the university, the notion gradually becomes a concept. Robert Escarpit (1976) analyzes the document as a “*visible or touchable informational*

¹ According to Briet, the document was previously defined as “all bases of materially fixed knowledge, and capable of being used for consultation, study and proof” (2006: 10), which Briet expands to include “any concrete or symbolic indexical sign [*indice*], preserved or recorded towards the end of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon” (Briet, 2006: 10). She develops the idea that every living being can be a document from the moment it is an object of study. Then she synthesizes with one sentence the idea of complexity of an intellectual work on the links between document and information: “Documentary unity tends to get close to the elementary idea, to the unity of thought, while the forms of documents grow, the amount of documents increase, and the techniques of the documentalist craft are perfected” (Briet, 2006: 13). The more we attribute document status to things, objects, and living beings, the more complex the notion becomes. On this view, it is the *use* which makes the document.

² Along with Roland Barthes, they created the Committee of Information and Communication Sciences in 1972, which was the precursor of the French Society of Information Science and Communication.

³ Meyriat and Escarpit founded Information and Communication Science as a French university discipline in 1975.

*object with a double independence regarding time: synchrony and stability*⁴ (Escarpit, 1976: 55). He stresses the fundamental difference between an event, understood as a fact, and a document, in which data memory is registered in physical form. In this context, document and event are opposed to the extent that an event occurs in a defined space and time and it is not reproduced, transcribed or transmitted, whereas a document is in essence predictable and can be reproduced. The document is thus

*an accumulation of fixed and permanent traces [...] where answers to feedback, through time, to earlier experiences, remain available for a reading, that is to say for a free exploration of any event or time constraint, depending on the purpose and the strategy to achieve it.*⁵ (Escarpit, 1976: 57)

Here, the information from the document depends on the established purposes of its production. The document is “*a way to build knowledge which assumes that the traces remain available for a reading*”⁶ (Escarpit, 1976: 57).

According to Robert Escarpit (1976), analyzing the content of the document and its mode of transmission is fundamental. In order to refine the concept of document, he rests on the operating mode of the three channels that allow the human being to receive information: touch, sight and hearing. Measuring the properties of these three modes of access to information in relation to time, he notices that the hearing channel focuses on messages registered in temporal linearity, whereas the visual channel allows the circulation of messages registered in traces. It is writing that solves the problem of the ephemerality of sound, allowing information to be registered, fixed and free from the moment of its enunciation, on a physical support that allows transportation, conservation and reproduction.

The writing produces text, the speech some discourse and the trace the icon. Thus text reconciles the iconic, discursive and documentary functions which lead to a stabilization of information. Then the document can be defined as:

a visible or touchable informational object with a double independence regarding time:

⁴ « *objet informationnel visible ou touchable et doué d'une double indépendance par rapport au temps : synchronie et stabilité* »

⁵ « *une cumulation de traces fixes et permanentes [...] où les réponses données en feed-back, à travers le temps, aux expériences antérieures, restent disponibles pour une lecture, c'est-à-dire pour une exploration libre de toute contrainte événementielle ou chronologique, en fonction du projet et de la stratégie destinée à le réaliser.* »

⁶ « *moyen de constitution d'un savoir, (qui) suppose que les traces restent disponibles pour une lecture* »

- *synchrony: internal independence of the message which is no more a linear sequence of events, but a multidimensional juxtaposition of traces,*
- *stability: global independence of the informational object which is no more an event registered in the passage of time, but a physical support for the trace, which can be stored, transported, reproduced.*⁷ (Escarpit, 1976: 120)

The document as a predictable and knowable product becomes a means for building knowledge. It is thus available for multiple readings that depend on the receiver's purposes. The availability of the transmitter and the availability of the receiver are characteristics of the document insofar as it is the solicitation of these traces by the reader that produces information.

1.2 Jean Meyriat: Intentionality and Multiplicity of the Document

Following Robert Escarpit, Jean Meyriat continues to deepen the notion of document as an information and communication object. On the occasion of the first congress of the French Society of Information and Communication sciences (SFIC) in 1978, Jean Meyriat argues that writing is the preferred means of communication. Writing is required to fix information for use as evidence. He registered the document in the dynamic of the user. But for Jean Meyriat, *“any object can become a document, that is to say the object of a search”*⁸ (1978: 28); indeed, in this way of thinking, it's *“the user, the receiver of the message, who makes the document”*⁹ (Meyriat, 1978: 28).

Falling within the scope of Suzanne Briet's analysis, Jean Meyriat states that every object is a document, or has the possibility to become one if it transmits information – that is to say, a message with meaning for the transmitter and the receiver. The document may have been produced to give information, but it also may have value as a document because the user ascribes it significance in searching for information. Thereby the user gives the document the status of support of a message with meaning. Here, the notion of document is similar to that of sign.

According to Jean Meyriat *“the desire to obtain information is a necessary component for an object to be considered as a document while the*

⁷« un objet informationnel visible ou touchable et doué d'une double indépendance par rapport au temps :

- *synchronie : indépendance interne du message qui n'est plus une séquence linéaire d'événements, mais une juxtaposition multidimensionnelle des traces,*
- *stabilité : indépendance globale de l'objet informationnel qui n'est plus un événement inscrit dans l'écoulement du temps, mais un support matériel de la trace qui peut être conservé, transporté, reproduit. »*

⁸ « tout objet peut devenir un document, c'est-à-dire l'objet d'une recherche »

⁹ « l'utilisateur, le récepteur du message, qui fait le document »

*will of its creator may have been different*¹⁰ (Meyriat, 1981: 52). The receiver plays a critical role in the informative function. In this definition, the document is so fully considered in terms of its use, to the extent that it is the mode of use that determines its status. The informative function depends on the use made of it – or, more precisely, it depends on the user’s purposive reading, which enables the physical object to be a document with informative content.

For Meyriat the document is seen as the result of a desire to learn or to inform. Information is activated by the will of a receiver, which can be considered a form of intentionality. It’s because there is intentionality to information that information can be activated in the document. The infinity of possible users of a document gives the information it contains an endless nature: a multiplicity of uses induces an informational infinity, which raises the question of meaning.

2. The meaning of the document

2.1 document by intention and document by attribution

Meyriat (1981) defines the document as an “*object that supports information, which is used to communicate and which is durable (the communication can be repeated)*”¹¹ (Meyriat, 1981: 53). Meyriat structures his definition on two axes of communication: the container, or the object that serves as a support, and the content, or the information. The document is firstly a support – a material object, a container – and also a concept – information, content.

This definition of the concept of the document is based on the distinction between one notion of a material nature – the object which serves as a support – and another notion of a conceptual nature – the content of communication which merges with information. The object can be seen as a document because it has the function of supporting or communicating information. Jean Meyriat (1981) distinguishes “*documents by intention,*”¹² which are produced from the start with the aim of communicating, and “*documents by attribution,*”¹³ which become documents when the user uses them to search for information.

In all cases, it is ultimately the user who gives to the object the status of “document.” The interrogation focused on an object transforms the object into a document to the extent that the content provides information as an answer to the question. The distinction made by Meyriat between document by intention and document by attribution allows us to consider the document as an object

¹⁰ « *La volonté d’obtenir une information est donc un élément nécessaire pour qu’un objet soit considéré comme un document alors que la volonté de son créateur peut avoir été autre.* »

¹¹ « *objet qui supporte de l’information, qui sert à la communiquer et qui est durable (la communication peut donc être répétée)* »

¹² « *documents par intention* »

¹³ « *documents par attribution* »

that can have several informative functions. Indeed, a single object may “become successively several different documents”¹⁴ (Meyriat, 1978: 26).

2.2 Immateriality of the document and “redocumentarization”

Digital technology reopens the debate on the nature of the document in its two aspects: document by intention and document by attribution. Taking into account modern information technology and the supposed loss of materiality of the document, Jean Meyriat (2006) refined his definition of the document by intention, now considering it in light of the notion of system. A document belongs to multiple systems at the same time.

*A document, as any product of human activity, originates in place (immaterial) and when the various social system or techno-social system meet. The term " system" is a set of elements of different but interrelated natures and organized so as to achieve a common goal. The techno-social systems are those whose main elements are firstly technical, and secondly, humans, individuals or groups.*¹⁵ (Meyriat, 2006: 12)

And Meyriat adds:

*Systemic analysis should characterize the document in the system that produces it and understand how it contributes to the system reaches its purpose.*¹⁶ (Meyriat, 2006: 13)

Thus, the archivist Marie-Anne Chabin notes that in

*the digital age, despite a radical redefinition of the concept of support that goes from a piece of material to a hardware and software system, the document keeps its dual function of recording facts or discourses and providing answers to the reader’s questioning.*¹⁷ (Chabin, 2004: 142)

¹⁴ « il devient successivement plusieurs documents différents. »

¹⁵ « Un document, comme tout produit de l’activité humaine, prend naissance au lieu (immatériel) et au moment où se rencontrent les divers systèmes sociaux ou techno-sociaux dont il est issu. Le terme « système » désigne un ensemble d’éléments de natures différentes mais interdépendants et organisés de manière à pouvoir atteindre un objectif commun. Les systèmes techno-sociaux sont ceux dont les éléments principaux sont d’une part des techniques et, d’autre part, des humains, des individus ou groupes. »

¹⁶ « Une analyse systémique doit permettre de caractériser le document dans le système qui le produit et de comprendre comment il contribue à ce que le système atteigne l’objectif qui est sa raison d’être. »

¹⁷ « l’ère numérique, en dépit d’une redéfinition radicale de la notion de support qui passe d’un morceau de matière à une chaîne matérielle et logicielle, le document garde cette double fonction d’enregistrement des faits ou du discours et d’offre au questionnement du lecteur. »

Jean-Paul Metzger and Geneviève Lallich-Boidin consider redefining the document in a digital context by only focusing on the support. For them, “*A digital document is a document that has the characteristic of being an electronic support and that is perceptible through digital technology*”¹⁸ (2004: 12). In other words, the digital document is considered as a new communication technique resulting in mastering specific skills.

Seeking to reconcile the opinions of document theorists with those of information professionals and researchers in the social sciences, a group of researchers from the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) gathered around the multidisciplinary network “Document” (RTP-DOC) to clarify the concept of the document by discussing the issue of the materiality of the document:

*A document can be defined as the representation of a shared truth beyond the chaos (silence and noise), the cacophony (confusion and sensation) and forgetting (the intimate and the ephemeral). Thus, anthropological terms (readability – perception, form-sign), cognitive terms (intelligibility, assimilation, text-content) and social terms (sociability-integration, medium-relation) must not only be relevant each one separately but also be consistent together. If it cannot be “seen” or spotted, “read” or understood, “known” or learned, a document is of no use.*¹⁹ (Pédauque, 2006)

Having focused on the immateriality of the digital document, the group suggests the idea of a “redocumentarization,” which is a documentary materialization of immaterial information circulating on networks. This “redocumentarization” induces documentary transformations. Adapting document processing, search tools and languages to the digital does not eliminate the necessary mediation between the public and documents. The digital document is then defined as an object built by authors and sometimes rebuilt by others. Thus digitization brings out the complexity of issues regarding, for instance, the legitimacy of documents without a traditional, fixed support.

RTP-DOC examines the digital document through the prism of traditional issues of documentation such as storage and retrieval, knowledge

¹⁸ « *Un document numérique est un document qui a pour caractéristique d’être sur un support électronique, d’être perceptible via la technologie numérique.* »

¹⁹ « *un document peut être défini comme la représentation d'une vérité partagée au-delà du chaos (le silence et le bruit), de la cacophonie (la confusion et le sensible) et de l'oubli (l'intime et l'éphémère). Ainsi, les modalités anthropologiques (lisibilité-perception, forme-signe), cognitives (intelligibilité, assimilation, texte-contenu) et sociales (sociabilité-intégration, medium-relation) doivent non seulement être pertinentes prises chacune séparément, mais encore être cohérentes entre elles. S'il ne peut être "vu" ou repéré, "lu" ou compris, "su" ou retenu, un document n'est d'aucune utilité.* »

organization and transmissibility. In fact, this group seeks to reconsider the features of the document through the changes brought by digital technology. For them “with computers, (...) the document as a human prosthesis has made a paradigmatic leap”²⁰ (Pédauque, 2006).

Thus, it seems that the traditional functions of the document undergo a shift in the digital world, modifying the document’s uses and conceptions. According to Jean-Michel Salaün,

*Before our eyes a new compromise appears between a multiplicity of actors to reinvent documents – the artifacts of substitution. In this process, the digital plays a major role, but it is certainly not the only phenomenon involved. [...] The document is but a vector of this multiplication and renewal, and perhaps a catalyst in the transformation of earlier conventions.*²¹ (2004)

3. The social value of the document

In 2006, analyzing the document as an element that is part of multiple systems at the same time, Jean Meyriat reconciles the traditional document and the digital document. According to him, he gives a new definition of the document (digital or not):

- *The document that brings information is not a simple vehicle. It has its own existence; it interacts with the information that is consubstantial to it.*
- *The document has an author who can’t be ignored, who had an intention to communicate and who is reflected in the objective assigned to the document;*
- *The author is not disembodied, existing only to produce the document; he is a social being, who takes on several roles in society, each of which can impose different constraints.*
- *Any document is embedded within a specific communication system, designed with a specific objective. It is useful to have knowledge of this at least in a general sense, as a reference for*

²⁰ « avec l’ordinateur [...] le document en tant que prothèse humaine a fait un saut paradigmatique. »

²¹ « Il se construit sous nos yeux un nouveau compromis entre une multiplicité d’acteurs, pour réinventer des documents ou des artefacts de substitution. Dans ce processus, le numérique joue un rôle majeur mais il n’est sûrement pas le seul phénomène en cause. [...] Le document ne saurait être qu’un vecteur de multiplication, de renouvellement et peut être un des ferments de la transformation des conventions qui les ont instituées. »

*initial identification and possible subsequent deviations.*²²
(Meyriat, 2006: 26)

The social value of the document seems to be at the heart of the definition of the document. The document is primarily meaningful and active in the development and reception process.

3.1 Document: support and sign

Viviane Couzinet insists that defining the document by the link between document and information highlights the idea of movement of the container and content. For her, the document is “*the mold in which the information, the content, takes shape, both on the communicational level and on the support that allows it to circulate*”²³ (Couzinet, 2008: 57). According Annette Beguin-Verbrugge the digital or analog document is essentially defined by its primary function, which is to communicate information and thereby demonstrate the existence of data. For her, “*The document is what we keep as evidence, making manifest information and demonstrating its existence to someone*”²⁴ (Beguin-Verbrugge, 2008: 138). By intention or by attribution, the search for the meaning of the document requires the consideration of the material of the document. Understanding a document requires analyzing its support, understood as a construction material.

Caroline Courbières is also interested in the problem of meaning, considering the document as an informational object with communicational purposes composed of a sign and its support. The document is part of a complex information and communication device that acts on the meaning of the document. So she chooses to cross semio-linguistic analysis with mediology in order to embrace the density of the document. She proposes to define the document as an artifact precisely to the extent that it only exists when the receiver recognizes it as such. For her the document “*shares a common destiny*

²² « - le document qui apporte l'information n'est pas un simple véhicule. Il a une existence propre, il interagit avec l'information qui lui est consubstantielle;
- le document a un auteur qu'on ne peut ignorer, et qui avait une intention de communiquer et qui se traduit dans l'objectif assigné du document;
- cet auteur n'est pas un être désincarné, n'existant que pour produire du document; c'est un être social, qui dans la société dans laquelle il vit tient à la fois plusieurs rôles qui peuvent chacun lui imposer des contraintes différentes;
- tout document s'inscrit dans un système spécifique de la communication, qui vise un objectif propre. Il est utile d'en avoir une connaissance au moins globale, comme un référentiel pour identification initiale et ses éventuelles déviations ultérieures. »

²³ « le moule dans lequel l'information, le contenu, se met en forme sur le plan communicationnel, et en même temps le support qui lui permet de circuler »

²⁴ « Le document, c'est ce que l'on garde comme preuve, ce qui rend l'information manifeste et témoigne de son existence pour quelqu'un. »

*with the sign since its identification is the result of an interpretation, not its starting point*²⁵ (Courbières, 2004).

The social value of the document depends on who produces it – through use. In this light, the search for the meaning of the document cannot do without some further grounding – more precisely, a discussion of the document as a composite material.

Yves Jeanneret emphasizes the lexical-semantic solidarity between document and information. He considers it indeed difficult, if not impossible, to imagine any information detached from its material expression:

*The document is a medium used in particular way, which is not only defined by hardware characteristics but by forms of expression and cultural uses. That is to say that there is no document without support, but the support is not itself a document.*²⁶ (Jeanneret, 2000: 71)

In conjunction with the document, he defines two types of information. The information of type 1, which is mathematical information, computer data or more precisely a cyber pulse from the mathematical theory of information by Shannon. Information of type 2, which is social information – that is to say, information with meaning in an intellectual point of view. It is the social information which interested information and communication sciences, and the document conveys this social information.

Caroline Courbières and Gérard Régimbeau (2006) continue thinking about the context of the document within its social dimensions. The document is then considered “*in networks, commerce, as documentary material, as artwork that reveal, show or anticipate social practices*”²⁷ (Courbières & Régimbeau, 2006).

3.2 Document circulation and rhizomes

So documents (digital or not) always circulate in societies, and this circulation gives them social value. According to Yves Jeanneret:

There are in the document three key dimensions that make it more than a simple support: It is a set of signs which refers to codes or more generally to modes of interpretation, socially instituted; it has a

²⁵ « *partage un destin commun avec le signe puisque son identification est le résultat d'une interprétation, non son point de départ* »

²⁶ « *Le document, c'est un support utilisé d'une façon particulière, qui n'est pas seulement définie par des caractéristiques matérielles mais par des formes d'expression et des usages culturels. C'est-à-dire qu'il n'y a pas de document sans support, mais aussi que le support n'est pas lui-même un document.* »

²⁷ « *dans les réseaux, les métiers, en tant que matière documentaire, en tant qu'objets de pratiques artistiques qui dévoilent, illustrent ou anticipent des pratiques sociales* »

*documental genre that we relate to a set of practices more or less identified (a list, a table, a “web page,” a “multimedia title,” etc.). Finally, our attitude toward these meaningful objects presupposes a culture, powerful and hidden, of the circulation of documents, which makes us know how to use and evaluate each of these messages depending on the traits that characterize its documentary space.*²⁸ (Jeanneret, 2000: 73)

In this perspective, Sabine Roux (2012) emphasizes the rhizomatic nature of the document by studying the operation of the travel document. She observes how a text, by nature heterogeneous and multiple, which is a priori a single report of an experience, a text about a travel, produced other documents. These documents belong to science in the institutional sense, but they are also subject to more literary or artistic forms that also involve knowledge.

Since Suzanne Briet we distinguish between primary and secondary documents: “the cataloged antelope is an initial document and the other documents are secondary or derived” (2006: 11). But in the case of travel documents, the initial report of a travel, a primary document by intention (with the meaning of Jean Meyriat) could produce of course secondary documents (by intention or by attribution) but also other primary documents. The initial document is not necessarily the most important document; the value assigned to a document depends on multiple elements (user, production conditions, support, context, author...). All these documents, with different meanings, have a social life and produce information, knowledge and art. They are cultural beings and they defy categorization. To analyze the document as a rhizome could help to understand the fundamental multiplicity of the document. “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 25). The metaphor of the rhizome is presented as an alternative to the continuum model.²⁹ It is useful to the understanding of the multiplicity of the document. It allows nomadic associations which involve attribution, intention, meaning and social values (political, artistic, economic) without any notion of hierarchy.

For example, Darwin’s logbook written aboard *The Beagle*, which is not available to the general public, predated the distinct, published version of the logbook, which can be seen as a work of popular science. But the initial logbook also produced (and without any notion of hierarchy), scientific texts (for

²⁸ « Il y a dans le document trois dimensions essentielles qui le qualifient autrement que comme un simple support : c’est un ensemble de signes, qui renvoie à des codes ou plus simplement à des modes d’interprétation, socialement institués ; on y reconnaît une forme générale, celle d’un type de document, que les hommes savent rattacher à un ensemble d’usages plus ou moins répertoriés, une liste, un tableau, une « page web », un « titre multimédia », etc ; enfin, notre attitude devant ces objets signifiants suppose toute une culture, puissante et cachée, de la circulation des documents, qui fait que nous savons affecter un usage et une valeur à chacun des types de messages, en fonction des marques qui caractérisent l’espace documentaire. »

²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari offer the rhizome as a conceptual alternative to the tree model. Any point of the rhizome is a sign whose meaning is experimental.

example, the theory of evolution (*On the Origin of Species*), theater (including the stage adaptation of Darwin's trip by Mauricio Celedon³⁰), and a manifesto against slavery³¹.

Similarly, the field notebooks of the ethnologist Jocelyn Bonnerave contain observations that constitute emergent theoretical thinking, especially in the way musicians raise political issues in their improvisational work. Springing from Bonnerave's field notebooks, these thinkings circulate through different types of documents: in the scientific literature (theses and scientific papers), in the novel he wrote, in the abstracts of collective improvisation, and in the artistic performances springing from the novel. All these forms are also innervated by sociological concepts (Roux & Courbières, 2014).

To give another example, documents which report Jean Malaurie's expeditions gave rise to various scientific and literary works. They are also responsible for the constitution of a polar documentary funds at the central library of the Museum of Natural History in Paris and for the creation of the Polar Academy of St. Petersburg. The writings of Malaurie are also involved in the recognition of an autonomous territory of Inuit, the Nunavik.

In all these examples, textual and editorial paths seem to allow forms of knowledge to flow from the travel document, which was, apparently, merely intended to record an experience. This object can then be considered as a material document which has the capacity to generate other documents (an edited account for the public, scientific articles written from the book or expedition report, a novel written from this first document, scientific theory, artistic performance...). Whether it is an ethnologist's field notes or a formal logbook, the travel document can be seen as an aggregation of scientific information and thus could be analyzed as a rhizome in which any point can be connected with any other.

Conclusion

Initially only considered from the perspective of the user, the document has gradually been enriched with a multiplicity of regards that helped develop the notion into a concept. The document, whether digital or not, is multiple by nature. This multiplicity affects its meaning, its interpretation and its social value. Multiplicity has no roots. It is without origin, without last production. New nodes are constantly being added, changing the apparent organization of the whole. The document circulates in social spaces and, just like the rhizome, it multiplies the nomadic associations which involve attribution, intention, meaning, interpretations and social values (political, artistic, economic, etc.) without any notion of hierarchy. The rhizome does not help to find the way it

³⁰ <http://www.teatrodelosilencio.net/spectacles/emma-darwin.html>

³¹ For example, in his diary, starting with spring 1832, there are, with a significant frequency, comments against slavery. All Darwin's comments against slavery have been analyzed by Patrick Tort (2010).

used to get lost, to enter through any point. According Deleuze and Guattari (1987), in contrast to the tree, the rhizome is a weed growing anywhere between everything.

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