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“Living Document”: From Documents to Documentality, from Mimesis to Performative Indexicality

Ronald E. Day

Indiana University - Bloomington, roday@indiana.edu

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I.

There is a fundamental distinction between a traditional bibliographic understanding of books and other documentary forms as 1) imitative (henceforth, “mimetic”) containers for meaning and reference, and as 2) a materialist and performative understanding whereby documents in their social circulation and cultural forms are studied as ways for constituting meaning and reference. Following Frohmann (2004) and Buckland (2014) this difference will be referred to in this paper as an epistemological distinction between documentation and documentality.¹

Documentation studies, in the mode of Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet’s works, the two most studied figures in what has become known as 20th century European Documentation (viewed in the Library and Information Science (LIS) tradition as a predecessor of, and thus in the tradition of, Information Science), follows what I am calling here a traditional bibliographic epistemology.² (Hence, for example, Otlet’s (Otlet, 1934) insistence on centering what he termed “documentology” on “the book,” understood as referring to both the material form of books and an idea of the book as a material container for representationally constituted knowledge.) In this bibliographic tradition, documents are understood as re-presenting the world through their contents. Such re-presentations constitute a document’s claim for evidence. Further, for Otlet and this tradition, metadata forms (subject and thesauri terms, abstracts, titles, etc.), are viewed as further abstract refinements of the representation of a document’s content. As I have previously discussed (Day, 2001), the works of these early and mid-20th century figures of European Documentation are rightly positioned as predecessors of later 20th century “information science” (understood in the sense of the field of Library and Information Science), insofar as the epistemic understanding of information as content representation is historically shared throughout this period, from European documentation through information science proper. Such a view of the meaning of the term “information” became dominant not only in Library and Information Science, but also in popular culture (particularly explicit in late 20th century Information Age discourses), eventually becoming understood as knowledge. (A phenomenon which, still today, puts under erasure the history and social importance

¹ Ferraris’s (2013) notion of documentality as inscribed social acts is yet another notion of documentality, though one which I will not address here.

² What I am terming here a “traditional bibliography” follows Otlet’s notion of an expanded, content-oriented, rather than simply descriptive, notion of bibliography, which he often terms “bibliologie” or “documentologie” (Otlet, 1934, Otlet, 1990). I call this “traditional” because it views the book as containing truth in its texts (Otlet: “facts”; cf. Frohmann, 2007), a notion that follows an ontotheological tradition up through what could be characterized as a mimetic (and in this sense “positivist”) position.

of modern knowledge institutions, such as academic libraries, laboratories, professional organizations, peer review, etc., and their interconnections.)

In this article, in distinction to documentation as an epistemic understanding of documents, I will discuss the epistemology of documentality as an indexical theory of documental functions, which I will develop through Bruno Latour's notion of information. This notion of indexicality is different than Suzanne Briet's (2006) notion of indexicality (which I have discussed elsewhere).

I will begin this paper with an historical problem that illustrates the issues of viewing documents as content representation. This is the problem identified by Vincent Debaene (2014) in early and mid-twentieth century French field anthropology of the "two book" phenomenon, which attempted to address a perceived epistemic distance between lived experience and its representation through scientific documents. The solution to this problem of presence and representation was the writing and publication by French anthropologists of a second, more literary, document after the production of the scientific paper or book, which supposedly represented the experience of the anthropologist and the group under study more fully. I will argue that both texts, however, followed genre conventions and practices, which are neither more nor less faithful to an original experience. I will argue that the notion of an original experience reflected in the content of the text misses the performatively indexical relationship of text to world and the role that this plays in scientific and other forms of documentality. In short, what Vincent Debaene identified as the French anthropologists' quest for producing a "living documents,"³ which closes the gap between life and documental representation, is a quixotic task, since the problem is not real but rather is a product of the epistemology of re-presentation, which forecloses from our understanding what really happens with scientific and other documents.

II.

The more narratively experiential and autobiographical "second" book of French anthropologists (Debaene, 2014) was neither more or less close to experience than the formal scientific article or book that preceded it. Both of these works followed genre conventions that attached to the lived experience—not in the sense that the lived experience was independent of these accounts, but rather, that each of these genres provided a different access to a real that exists only through understanding of it as something significant, including individuals' own understanding in the

³ The notion of the "living document" as I will discuss it in this article is different than contemporary notions of this term, which refer to texts that can be revised according to their circumstances of being read, either through editing (e.g., Wikipedia pages) or through interpretation (e.g., the U.S. Constitution).

event of their having an experience. This attachment between the documental apparatus and the real I will call “indexical,” for, as Charles Sander Peirce wrote of the indexical: “The index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established” (Peirce, 1955). The “physical connection” which an “interpreting mind” assumes, may be that of social habits, other cultural forms, and literal physical relations (as I will discuss through Bruno Latour’s understanding of maps). This is a very different use of the term “indexical” than Suzanne Briet’s (Briet, 1951) use of the term *indice*, as indicating documents that are referential by means of a system of identities and differences (for example, a subject heading in Library of Congress Subject Headings). As I will discuss, Briet’s notion of indexicality is closer to that of Saussure’s notion of language as a system of signs established out of differences, rather than Peirce’s pragmatism.

Let us dive a little deeper into Debaene’s argument. In *L’adieu au voyage: L’ethnologie française entre science et littérature* (English translation: *Far Afield: French Anthropology between Science and Literature*; Debaene, 2014), Debaene discusses the concept of the “living document” and how it was textually enacted in French anthropological research and popular culture during the 20th century. Debaene’s book traces the theme of the living document in the transition of French anthropology in the 19th and 20th centuries from museum anthropology to field anthropology, and the intersection of French anthropology with the artistic and literary avant-garde in the 1930s (via Georges Bataille’s journal *Documents*) and its presence in the 1960s and 1970s in other fields such as literary theory and philosophy (via semiotics in Roland Barthes, and philosophers associated with the journal *Tel Quel*, such as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva).

According to Debaene, later than in Anglo-American anthropology, French anthropology transitioned from a museum focus on collecting representations of social life via textual and physical documents in museums and libraries in Europe to sending anthropologists into the field so to observe social life first-hand. This transition from representing human society in a collection to recording human society in the field was also accompanied by a peculiar publishing habit: composing a scientific book or research article and then also writing a second book on the same research, which was a narrative accounting of the anthropologists’ own experiences doing this research and the more informal, and supposedly more lived, experience of the group being researched. By means of the two books, an event was depicted both as knowledge and as experience, first through the more methodologically strict rhetoric and genre of the scientific report, and then through a supposedly broader rhetorical frame of popular literature. Thus, the “two cultures” (as C. P. Snow famously put it in 1959) of science and literature were textually performed by means of two forms of realism, each supposedly re-presenting the field experience in their own ways, though the second was supposedly less mediated.

Ironically, however, despite attempting to erase the re-presentational epistemology of museum anthropology, the two-book phenomenon reasserted anthropology as content re-presentation in the very phenomenon of the two books and the problem this strategy sought to address. For it was the purpose of the second book to get closer to the true presence of “experience” by representing the objects or subjects of the research yet again, this time in supposedly more authentic or immediate form. In short, *the phenomenon of the two books erased the social and cultural documentality of the two books by viewing each book or document as a form of representing lived experience, rather than as a form of lived experience.* This reduction of social function and cultural genre to re-presentation reduced each document and book to being information, in the sense that Otlet and later LIS information science and popular culture (Day, 2001) understood this term, namely as what Bernd Frohmann (2004) called “epistemic content.”

Documentation as mimetic re-presentation creates a double bind that leads to endless repetition with no resolution of the issue possible: the representation of presence can only be achieved by the presence of representation, but each representation falls short of presence, other than in terms of its own performativity. Instead of accepting each documental version as a mode of documentation valid according to its own practices, giving access to an event which itself can only be known through such practices, the two books (or more) seek to produce yet another text so as to get “closer” to what can, in truth, neither be represented closer nor further away. As I will argue, each document is performed according to its own documentality, its own practical and performative indexical relation to the phenomena, enabled by its social, cultural, or physical entanglement with the objects, subjects, or events studied.

In the history of documentation and information science in modernity, the attempt to resolve the double bind of a re-presentational epistemology by further representations creates all sorts of absurd procedures and epistemic claims, not least being Paul Otlet’s epistemic claims to greater degrees of synthetic truth or “facts,” based on smaller and smaller atomic documentary elements and greater abstractions (Otlet, 1934; Frohmann, 2007). With the French anthropologists’ two-book phenomenon, we see two, or even more, books or other documents attempting to get closer to a “lived experience” whose noumena further retreats with each attempt. The reason for all of this is that the document—book or other documentary form—is claimed as representing a presence that by its very definition must escape it: “experience.”

In what follows I will show why documentation as mimetic re-presentation can only be viewed as one function of documentality, not as the basis for understanding the epistemic and rhetorical functions of documents. The implications of this are important not only for our understanding of documents, but

also of information more broadly, in so far as “information” is understood representationally within what I’ve termed in this paper traditional bibliography.

III.

As Bernd Frohmann (2004) discussed, information seeking behavior and other such research utilize a notion of information as what Frohmann called “epistemic content,” where information is seen as the content of evidential forms. This notion of information, a notion of unmediated and dematerialized representations, can be seen in Paul Otlet’s understanding of facts (Frohmann, 2007) as being not the result of rhetorical or documentary forms, but rather, of the imitation of social events and natural entities (Otlet, 1934; Otlet, 1990). In short, the epistemic claims of traditional bibliography, bibliology, documentology, or then information science in Library and Information Science has been grounded in an idealism of content as reflective of “facts” in the world, rather than “facts” being constituted by the workings of technique, method, rhetoric, and documentary forms and genres. Frohmann (2004) has critiqued this epistemology, showing that the evidential claims—the “information,” the meaning and referents—of science journals (and by implication other events of “information seeking”) are materially constituted by the specific methods, institutions, and social practice of constructing and using documents.

Bruno Latour’s works have been particularly influential upon science studies in displacing a mimetic sense of representation as the privileged epistemology for both science and science studies. Thus, we should recall his understanding of the notion of information as it operates in the sciences.

An often overlooked source for Latour’s view of information occurs in the sixth chapter of his 1987 book, *Science in Action*, where the notion of information is recharacterized from being epistemic content to being cycles of inscription, from empirical sources to inscriptional institutional centers (*centres de calcul*—centers of calculation, or more colloquially, computer or data centers, inclusive of libraries and other traditionally documentary institutions) and back again to empirical phenomena (see also Latour, 1996). In this epistemology for information, at different points of inscription technologies, techniques, and methods inscribe and fix meaning, as well as translate such from previous sets of techniques, technologies, and methods toward the next set. (For example, a photographic microscope records amoebas in a drop of water and then such are recorded in field notebooks and then in databases, and finally they are recorded in articles and books, which are collected in laboratories and then libraries, which are then used in classrooms and used in further research, the last which checks, modifies, and progresses the previous research findings.) The steps and cycles of documentary inscriptions and re-inscriptions, of their alteration by the objects and subjects of

study and by the techniques, technologies, and methods of inscriptions and re-inscriptions at different stages, constitutes scientific knowledge. In this sense, such information lifecycles map how science operates as a system of knowledge production based on steps of documentary recording and revision. “Information,” for Latour, refers to these inscriptions and re-inscriptions as they move from documentary form to documentary form (including their holding institutions) and back to the studied objects (in the physical sciences) or subjects (in the social sciences).

While Latour doesn’t give us a theory of documents per se, Latour’s works view information as made up of cycles of translation from one fixed socio-technical form onto another. Since most modern definitions of “document” include a notion of fixed recording, we can view documentality as the process of this inscription by which inscriptions adequate or non-mimetically correspond to the real through methods, techniques, technologies, established practices, standards, and institutions.

IV.

Arguably, Latour’s works promote an indexical understanding of documents and what they document. However, this indexicality is quite distinct from the indexicality in Suzanne Briet’s *Qu’est-ce que la documentation?* (Briet, 1951). In Briet’s work, the concept of indexicality develops out of her notion of a document as an indexical sign (*indice*). A document is indexical, at least in so far as it is what she calls an “initial” document, because its referential function is a result of the play of identity and difference within a documentary ontology or taxonomy (Briet, 1951; Briet, 2006). The linguistic theory behind such an epistemology is the structural linguistics of Saussure (2011), where signification is stabilized by means of the play of identity and difference.

Latour’s indexicality owes more to pragmatics and process philosophy (e.g., the writings of C.S. Peirce and Alfred North Whitehead). Here, reference is a product of the pragmatic application of language to the world. Meaning is a product of an adequation (i.e., a non-mimetic correspondence) between signs and things. This theory of language and of documentary meaning are particularly well suited to signification and documentation in the modern sciences, where scientific texts can’t just refer to things via symbolic relationships between signs in previous non-scientific literature (as with medieval science, where, for example, the natural history of the trout is constituted by ancient references in literature, its noble nature, etc., as well as by its natural habits), but rather where speculative epistemic claims are held in check by the movements and intentions of objects and subjects independent of sheer symbolism.

One of Latour's most famous and consistent illustrations of this pragmatic indexicality is his example of maps, used throughout his writings (for example, Latour, 1996). For Latour, the referentiality of maps is established not by their representational features alone, but by use. A map works because one builds it out of coordinates in the field and ultimately takes it back to the field to be tested. Ultimately, a map is built for use, not for aesthetic qualities.

Whether maps are compared to other maps or maps are designed to resemble what they refer to, the utility of a map lies in its ability to move us from point A to point C through an indexical relation (point B) to which it is attached as a point of reference. Such a movement can occur not only in physical space, but also in conceptual space, where one is moved from one concept to the next or one procedure to the next. Mimetic functions are secondary to these indexical and "pragmatic" functions. Peirce (1955) analyzed signs in terms of their being iconic, indexical, or symbolic. In traditional bibliography and the European Documentation tradition up through "the modern invention of information" (Day, 2001), documents and other informational forms are understood as having epistemic content which mirrors physical or social facts. (The term "fact," indeed, is ambivalent, referring to both epistemic representations and empirical presences.) In contrast, documentality views documentary evidence and meaning as constructed through an indexical relationship between documents and the real, using genre conventions, social practices, technologies and techniques, and other epistemic devices. In this view, a mimetic function to documents (as, for example, a portrait) is but one of many types of genre functions rather than an epistemically dominant one. From this perspective, the problem that the French anthropologists attempted to address through their second book vanishes. Each book has a genre form and addresses an audience which is familiar with that form.

V.

We can find analogies to Latour's example of maps in Frohmann and Buckland's notions of documentality. Here, I will use Michael Buckland's work "Documentality Beyond Documents" (Buckland, 2014) to discuss this. In his article, Buckland points to the example of passports as instances of documentality where representation is not the dominant function of the passport.

A passport allows one to pass from point A to point C through the document's use at point B where it connects with an external system: for example, the customs and immigration checkpoint. Like the coordinates or icons on a map corresponding to the features of the physical world, or the experiential narratives of fictional literature corresponding to ordinary understandings of the phenomenological world, the passport attaches to external immigration systems by means of codes (scan codes and passport stamps), and it also attaches to the user by

means of these codes and the passport photograph and other identifying information (e.g., birthdate, physical characteristics of the bearer, etc.), as well, of course, as being on the person of the bearer.

The passport photo is not meant to be a portrait of the bearer. A U.S. passport may be held up to ten years, for example, so the photograph may not closely resemble the bearer by the time it must be renewed. It is not meant to hang on the wall as a portrait either. It is meant to be used with other codes in order to give passage to the bearer when presented to an immigration officer.

Together, the signs and codes in a passport not only fitly describe the bearer and their previous international travel, but they fit within the governmental technical and social systems to which the passport belongs and to which it connects, both on the bearer's national side and the other country. Through this connection of documentary system (the passport) to documentary system (the custom and passport systems, the security systems, etc.), the bearer is allowed to proceed to another country and gain rights and agency in that new country, just as a user of a map in a physical landscape is allowed to follow a trail or switch to another trail. The bearer is not only politically positioned as a specific national entity with rights and responsibilities, but through this, he or she is also given future trajectories of rights and responsibilities as visitors or temporary residents of other countries.

The indexical linkage between documentary forms—e.g., in the case of passports, the passport document and the passport systems; in the case of maps, the map document and the natural forms one negotiates through its aid) allows a movement from firstness to thirdness via secondness—to use Peirce's (1954) language—or from point A to point C through point B. Re-presentational or mimetic images (for example, the passport photograph), may be one element of this movement. The larger process, however, is a process of documentality, where documents are indexed to an external reality that shapes its meaning and trueness.

VI.

Documentality, as a performative or pragmatic indexical movement, occurs as well with strictly mimetic genre forms, however, such as novels and portraits. In the case of literature, meaning is achieved through both cultural literary forms (such as fiction) and their social use (such as different processes of reading). The novel as a realist genre, for example, has evolved as a material/cultural form of long narrative, with character and plot structure being a dominant feature, and a temporal narrative of beginning, middle, and end, which often follow character movements in time. In this form, fiction is used for evidence production in not only literary contexts, but psychological ones, in so far as fiction may be used to gain understanding of non-literary experiences through the correspondence of the formal modalities of realist fiction and ordinary understandings of experience (e.g., understanding persons as

characters, understanding experiential time as durational, and understanding human interactions according to plot structures, etc.). The imitative, mimetic, effects of realist novels are due to shared formal elements between their genre and ordinary understandings of the social world.

Maps may, more or less, contain mimetic elements. Geographic maps represent spatial bodies and distances, but as we well know, standard Mercator maps of the world, for example, represent the continents in distorted manners, and they introduced conventions such as north–south/up–down orientation into our geographical understanding of the world. Further, conceptual maps, like those used in data science, impose geographical conventions onto conceptual relations and interpretations. With conceptual maps, imitative conventions from geographical maps are borrowed so to create an explanation of conceptual relations.

VII.

Documental relations are not only spatial, but they contain temporal qualities of firstness to secondness to thirdness. They do so not only by the progressive movement of thought and bodies, but through creating “retentions” (memories, traces) and “protentions” (anticipations, future paths) related to habits and heuristics (Stiegler, 1998). An enduring social relationship between two or more people requires connected retentions and protentions of individuals. The more intimate the relations, the longer the vows of these retentions and protentions across time, bonding agents to one another and to environments, habits, and anticipations.

Relationships can be established by documents as simple and short in duration as highway signs, promising this or that route. Or they can be long lasting and complex as wedding or marriage, vowing a faith in a joined life into the future.

VIII.

Last, algorithms are made up of durational indexical calculators, using semantic inferences, statistical relations, geographical location markers, user input, and other past, present, and predictive traces to move a user from document A to document C. Neal Thomas’s work has shown the philosophical presuppositions that are deployed by such systems (Thomas, 2018). Algorithms are powerful tools for moving us from point A to point C by socio-technical means for drawing upon and creating past retentional indexes and documents, present intentions, and calculated protentions that guide and condition us in the future.

Conclusion

Documentality, akin to McKenzie's (1999) "sociology of texts," gives us a better chance of understanding the relation of documents to their constructed sense and reference than the mimetic tradition of Otletian bibliography, documentation, and information science. The first step away from the mimetic tradition is to understand that what counts as documents vary, there is no documentary or informational "epistemic content" (Frohmann, 2004) per se, and so, correspondingly, there are different types of "document acts" (Smith, 2014). But beyond this, a fundamental shift in our epistemology of documents is needed, one whereby we move away from the European Documentation perspective, which continues in the modern invention of our notion of information as fact and knowledge through the 20th and now into the 21st centuries (Day, 2001). It is important to construct a documentary epistemology to understand this, and in this article, I have argued that a documental epistemology based on indexical performativity rather than mimetic re-presentation can provide such. Thus, after previous authors, a terminological distinction between documentation and documentality has been suggested.

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