

Documents/Documentation

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12 MARCH 2017

Documentation – that is, documents and practices with them (or documentary practices) – plays a central role in constituting and materializing information. Bernd Frohmann (2004) argues that information is an effect of documentation. He argues that attention to documents and documentary practices “reveals how it is that particular documents, at particular times and places and in particular areas of the social and cultural terrain, become informative”. In order for a document to be considered a document, and consequently to be informing, the following properties should be present: materiality, institutionality, discipline, and historicity.

Documentation is material. Frohmann explains that “since documents exist in some material form, their materiality configures practices with them”. Documents are some kind of material objects. Buckland (1997), inferring from Suzanne Briet’s classic work on *What is Documentation?*, similarly argues that documents are physical objects and physical signs. They must exist in some kind of material form; moreover, their particular kind of materiality (stone, clay, paper, digital, etc.) determines what kinds of practices (documentary practices) are and can be done with them. For example, practices afforded by clay tablets are very different than those afforded by digital tablets; or, the practices possible with pen and paper are different than those with touch-sensitive digital screen. The materiality of documents therefore can change, expand, or constrain our practices, and possibilities, with them.

Documentation relies upon some kind of institutionality for their status as certain kinds of documents and particularly for their information to become authoritative. Frohmann discusses that “much of the authority of the informativeness of documents depends on the institutional sites of their production, a point made by [Michel] Foucault in his discussion of the importance of institutions to the formation of enunciative modalities”. The institutional embeddedness of a document shows where it is produced and for what reasons, who uses it, where and how it is deployed, what effects it has or

can have, what it permits or forbids, what it opens or closes, what it reveals or conceals, and so on.

Documentation needs discipline. As Frohmann notes, “documentary practices, like most others, requires training, teaching, correction, and other disciplinary measures”. Practices with documents, in other words, are usually disciplined in some manner; that is, we are disciplined in how, when, and why we create, interpret, and use them for different purposes in diverse contexts. Indeed, the processing, in the broadest sense, of documents is a crucial feature of documentation. As Buckland notes, in order for an object to be a document it has to be processed in some way, or put differently, made into some kind of document.

Documentation depends upon its context, specifically its (historical) context. Documents and documentary practices “arise, develop, decline, and vanish – all under specific historical circumstances”. Indeed, “different times and different places exhibit different kinds of [documents and] documentary practices and different kinds of institutions”. Buckland notes that documents have intentionality: it is intended that an object be treated as some kind of document. This intention is also related to Buckland’s phenomenological position that an object must also be perceived to be a document. Both intentionality and perception of a document depend upon context. A document in one historical period or place may not be the same kind of document or even considered a document at all in another.

Practices, moreover, with a document may only be possible in one historical setting but not in another (or at least not in the same way or for the same reasons). Context also configures what agents are involved with documentation. Niels Windfeld Lund (2007) notes that there are many different and multiple kinds of agents, with varying degrees of agency and concern, involved with documentation, including both human and non-human (machines, computers, algorithms, infrastructures, systems, etc.). The kinds and degrees of involvement of agents are essential parts of the bigger picture, so to speak, of the documentation itself and consequently contextually contingent as well.

Buckland (2016) extends the contextual considerations of documentation further by illuminating three complementary and simultaneous aspects, or what he terms dimensions, of document: physical, mental, and social.

The physical dimension of a document is its materiality. He states that “a document is some entity regarded by someone as signifying something. It has to be a physical, material entity. One can discuss a text or a work in an abstract sense but texts and works can exist as documents only in some physical manifestation”. A document’s materiality therefore means that it exists in space and time. It occupies some kind of physical space. It takes time to interact with (to record a narrative, read a text, hear a recording, scroll through a page, etc.); moreover, some documents are designed to change over time (moving images, performances, etc.).

The mental dimension of a document involves the aforementioned intentionality and phenomenological positions of documentation. Buckland argues that, in order for something to be considered or treated as a document, “someone must view [the object] as signifying (or potentially signifying) something, even if unsure of what the significance might be”. Since an object must be perceived to be a document, “status as a document...is an individual, personal mental judgment and, therefore subjective. Such a perception occurs only in a living mind and, with any living, learning mind, the perception can change as what the individual knows changes”. Indeed, a change in context can change a document’s phenomenological position. A document perceived to be a document in one setting may not be so perceived in another.

The social, or cultural, dimension of a document involves intersubjectivity. Buckland discusses how “an individual can make a subjective idea objectively perceptible by others”. An important way that a subjective idea is made objectively perceptible by others is with and through documentation. Buckland explains that “a text may be authored through the mental efforts of a solitary individual but physical documents are ordinarily the result of actions of many different people. A printed book depends on paper manufacturers, printers, publishers, typesetters, binders, book retailers, and many others. Shared financial, transportation, and other infrastructures support all of their varied contributions, and a book would not be printed in the absence of readers” (Buckland, 2016). Recall Lund’s observation that there are a multitude of both human and non-human agents involved in documentation of all kinds.

Thus, “physicality is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for being a document, there must also be a mental angle, which, in turn, entails a social (cultural) angle. The physical disposition of documents is influenced by social controls. The inability of any one angle to fully characterize a document explains the role of documents in the social construction of reality”. To understand the nuances of a document, its materiality, cognitive, and cultural aspects need to be taken into account. A document is not only a material

object, but one that is intended, perceived, and treated as a document in intersubjective cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS: document, documents, documentary practices, documentation, information, materiality, information

GENEALOGIES: Michael Buckland, Bernd Frohmann, Niels Windfeld Lund, (and Suzanne Briet, Paul Otlet, Annelise Riles, Kiersten F. Latham, Jodi Kearns, Tim Gorichanaz, Carol Choksy, Brian O'Connor, Joacim Hansson, Andrea Varheim, Ron Day, Roswitha Skare)

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