

Preprint (Published version may vary slightly). Forthcoming in: Skare, Roswitha, Lund, Niels Windfeld und Vårheim, Andreas (Hrsg.): *A Document (Re)turn. Contributions from a Research Field in Transition*. Frankfurt a.M. 2007: Peter Lang.

Northern Light: Fresh Insights into Enduring Concerns

Michael Buckland

In this volume's introductory chapter on the early years of the Documentation Studies ("Dokvit") program at the University of Tromsø, Niels Lund, the founding director, addresses the challenge of building a discipline and creating a profession. The Dokvit program has been a new and innovative program, not because the central concerns addressed were new, but because the program has been characterized by fresh insights.

Concerns that really matter to society are likely to be complex and are unlikely to either entirely new or ever finally resolved. Sustained attention to them is needed and, always, fresh insights are needed. Ron Day's chapter describing the powerful insights of Suzanne Briet (1894-1989), who pioneered the first program in Documentation Studies some forty years earlier in Paris, is very fitting. Briet was the founding director of studies of the Institut National des Techniques de la Documentation at the *Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers* in Paris (Briet 2006).

It is not accidental that new insights arose when a serious real-life problem was addressed. The Norwegian law requiring new publications to be deposited at the National Library had been updated to include more modern forms of publication. This change required the library to deal with new and unfamiliar forms of documents, but the practical difficulties of providing sustainable access to publications in new media forms were not well-understood. Examining the National Library's task of preserving and providing access to publications in new media addresses a large part of the future challenge facing archives, libraries, publishers, museums, and any agency expecting to make use of new media. In this case, a single library's need for help touches the interests of a range of academic fields, most obviously librarianship, but also communications, information science, media studies, and broadly across the humanities. Addressing practical problems, though often inconvenient and sometimes considered undignified, is an excellent path to deeper insights and new ideas. Any practical difficulty may provide stimulating challenges and may generate funding, but individual problems need to be framed in more general terms if what is learned is to be of wider, future use. New forms of documents are being widely adopted across a wide range of organizations even

though the consequences of this are not well understood. The impact on industry, government, research, and society are extensive, so the study of documents can only increase.

Three dimensions

The usual approach when developing new programs in this field has been to combine the notoriously ill-defined notion of *information* with an invocation of interdisciplinarity. This process leads to an incoherent collage. The result may contain interesting elements, but the lack of coherence inhibits rational planning and makes the program hard to explain to outsiders. The Tromsø Dokvit program, like Briet's, was wiser: the notion of a *document* was taken as the central defining concept and was understood to include any signifying thing. *Documentation* was seen as both the process of *documenting* and also the outcome of that process. So *Documentation Studies* ("Dokvit") includes the systematic examination of all aspects of *document* and *documentation*. This clear and practical formulation has conceptual and practical advantages and may be considered in three dimensions: meaning, technology, and economics.

Meaning

Meaning is at the heart of documentation in three ways: First, creating a document is ordinarily a matter of expressing some meaning; second, reading, viewing, or otherwise perceiving a document is a matter of inferring or constructing meaning; and, third, search and selection require the formulation of queries or other navigational moves which are commonly a matter of finding an effective way to express a meaning.

Meaning is rightly recognized as central to the humanities: Interpretation is the central concern of the arts, architecture, music, dance, literature, theater, and the rest of the humanities. So Documentation Studies should fit well into the humanities, but, so far, it has not. In some countries, the human sciences are broadly understood. In North America the humanities are typically fragmented into narrower foci defined in terms of individual media (e.g. music) and/or geo-linguistic cultural areas (e.g. Italian studies). But in all cases the concern is with the expression and interpretation of meaning. Since Documentation Studies necessarily embraces multiple media and multiple geo-linguistic areas, it has affinities with Media Studies and Cultural Studies, also cross-cutting enterprises, but it differs from both in being primarily a practical and professional field. One result of these three characteristics – multiple media, cross-cultural, and professional application – is that Documentation Studies, although sharing Humanities concerns, does not fit into the orthodox academic organizational structures of the humanities. On the other hand, one of the enigmas in the intellectual history of Library and Informa-

tion Studies has been a chronic failure to understand the relevance of the humanities in a field concerned with the expression and interpretation of meaning (Buckland 1996).

Technology/technique

All documents have physical manifestations. There are different types of expression (“media types”): Texts, images, numbers, diagrams, drawing, gesture, sculpture, explanatory models, and sounds. And there is a gradually increasing range of physical media (paper, film, analog magnetic tape, digital bits, etc.). Here, again, library schools and information schools have had a rather impoverished record. There used to be an emphasis on the history of the book and of printing, occasional attention to “non-book” (aka “audio-visual”) resources, and, now, an understandable and necessary emphasis, now, on digital and electronic technologies. But there has not been a sustained systematic and comparative attention to media types, whether sound, sight, smell, or touch, on the one hand, or physical media – whether clay, paper, electronic, or a human performance – on the other. It is difficult to see how library schools, information schools, or documentation programs can generalize their interests without a comparative attention to technologies and techniques. Barlindhaug’s chapter on analog sound and digital technology shows that inferences from textual documents should not be generalized to music and it illustrates the need to examine and compare diverse examples.

Socio-economic aspects

Traditional studies in library schools of the history of the book and of printing (as “historical bibliography” or “analytical bibliography”) acquired a narrowly technical focus, had very limited utility outside of rare book collections, and gradually withered. Recognition that book production was socially-situated came later and arose largely outside of library schools, notably through the work of Donald Mackenzie and French historians of the book. Only recently, has a fresh impetus from studies of the social practices of science begun to transform the vast but shallow reaches of “library user studies” into a far richer, more nuanced kind of investigation (e.g. Bishop et al. 2003).

It is a characteristic of modern society that we know less and less by ourselves. We are more and more dependent on data, messages, and records of every kind. Documents play an ever greater role in society: Lawyers and law courts use documents as evidence, as proof; schools use textbooks to teach, simultaneously increasing teachers’ effectiveness and reducing their freedom; scientists use documents (articles, offprints) as the archive of achievement and for personal status; media specialists and publicists use documents to persuade; governments use documents to exercise social control; religions use documents for authority and adherence; patriots use documents to commemorate and to reinforce loyalty; artists

create documents to inspire and to challenge; commerce is based on documented transactions, with the transition to reliable digital documents being a major challenge. (Choksy's chapter explains how one genre of document, contracts, create, define and maintain society). Documents shape our lives more and more. Modern society is nothing if not document-pervaded.

A useful by-product of defining a field of study is that it can stimulate fresh analyses of related fields. See, for example, Souminen's discussion of library studies and librarianship and Niedenthal's chapter on studies of light.

Specific empirical and methodological traditions

Each academic field adopts, adapts, and develops its methodological practices. The Tromsø program in Documentation Studies selected four specific thrusts:

Who? Human agency: Who created this document? Texts, Drucker tells us, are social productions, not the work of individuals. A wide variety of people are involved in differing ways, so this question reaches far beyond traditional questions of authorship and into the rich sociology of co-production. Anderson, O'Connor, and Kearns refer to *The Birds* as "the Hitchcock film", thereby privileging, understandably, the Director, but a major motion picture, like an opera, is a good example of a document that depends for its creation on many different hands. Further, documents commonly have a series of lives, with different players involved in differing ways at successive stages.

What? Materials and technologies: What technologies were used? What resources exploited? The phrase "information technology" is ordinarily and inappropriately restricted to electronic and digital technologies, even though more and more paper is used every year. What were the effects of innovation in the materials and technologies selected? Barlindhaug's examination of the interplay of analog sound and digital tools illustrates how complex the interactions can be.

How? Techniques adopted: What techniques were used? How were the technologies deployed? (The chapters by Back, Billsus, Denoue and Hilbert and by Bootz and Hautbois provide stimulating examples.) Innovation is commonly a case of existing materials and existing technologies being used in new and different ways. It is not enough to make a document available if those who read it do not believe what it says. The chapters by Broudoux and by Francke examine issues of credibility and authority.

Why? What purpose, what outcomes? The central question "What does a document document?" has several aspects: What was the purpose? What is revealed,

often unintentionally, about the creators? More generally, how do different forms of documents compare in different situations in their effectiveness for different purposes? Innovative combinations of analytical techniques are in order. Anderson, O'Connor and Kearns provide a striking example of combining radically different qualitative and quantitative analytical methods in their discussion of the dramatic opening sequence of Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

Specific conceptual framework

The distinguishing features of Documentation Studies are, first, the adoption of a document-centric perspective and, second, an inclusive "pan-documentary" field of vision. In practice, as in the first assignments given to the first students in "Dokvit," three complementary lines of inquiry can produce a rich analysis: Document analysis; social interrogation; and comparison of practices across different genres and traditions.

1. *Document analysis*. Taking a single document and examining it closely concerning its origins, purposes, roles, contexts, and fate can, like a good biography, provide a wealth of insights. A passport, a website, an opera, a published short story, or a theatrical performance can each evoke a complex microcosm of life with mental, social, and material culture, if examined closely. A comparative analysis will be implicit if not explicit, and showing how a text may change when transferred from a printed book to a CD should indeed be complemented by an analysis of how the content of CD might be transformed when moved to the format of a printed book. Analysis of medical records has proved a fertile area for document analysis as Olsen and colleagues show.

2. *Human agencies*. As already noted a single document may be the product of the efforts of many different individuals and groups. In a document-permeated society, analysis of who is involved in the many roles played is not only necessary for understanding the document, but also shines a beam of light into the ways that societies function. (Note Zacklad's chapter on the impact of the adoption of digital techniques by the general public.)

3. *Traditions and genres*. Human life and human cultures form their patterns. Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that meaning is constituted through activity, through the use of language ("language games") within specific contexts; that language usage differs in different language zones (different dialects); and that language is disambiguated within contexts and through specialized dialects. Documents, too, are used for expression and the same kind of mechanisms obtain. Genres of document (specific purposive combinations of materials, methods, and intended outcomes) arise among particular groups situated in a specific period and context. A

major contribution to Documentation Studies is the insight by Frohmann (2004) that Wittgenstein's approach to language can fruitfully be applied to document studies. Further, his chapter on "The multiplicity, materiality, and autonomous agency of documentation" shows that this approach can reveal inadequacies in widely held assumptions. Authorship, for example, is not always meaningful in relation to texts.

Documentation studies – A period of constitution

New technologies emerge and techniques evolve, but the core problems addressed in Documentation Studies are neither new nor unique (Buckland 1986). Niels Lund points out in his introductory chapter that the issues examined in "Dokvit" are already being addressed, more or less, in Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, Library and Information Studies, Media Studies, and so forth. But that, in itself, is not an argument against investment in Documentation Studies, any more than it is any argument against the existence of Communication Studies or any of the others. Rather, it is confirmation that there are important and enduring challenges that need more attention and an encouragement to be clearer in analyzing our concerns. (See Ørom's discussion of *document* and of *information*). Documentation Studies, like any other field, can justify itself, or not, by bringing interesting new insights or useful practical solutions. At Tromsø, the themes are as follows:

Structural Themes

1. Document forms: Study of the anatomy, physiology, and ecology of documents reveals their characteristics. Frohmann's chapter provides a nice example in the study of early modern inscriptional practices, which call into question present-day orthodoxies concerning information. By studying musical documents, Barlindehaug shows that inferences from textual documents cannot always be generalized across all media.
2. Document biography: Tracing the life-cycle of individual documents shows how they are formed, their relationships with other documents and with people, and the influences they have.
3. Docemes: The role of components of complex documents, which commonly also exist as documents in their own right, yields additional insights. Skare's chapter provides the nice example of the impact of a book's cover on the book. And, as Drucker tells us, "The attempt to define a part of a document raises immediate questions about the 'whole' we assume."

Themes of value and policy

What is a good document? Documents and documentation are purposive. So what can be said about “document goodness.” An initial approach is to distinguish between effectiveness (How suitable would a document be for some purpose?) and beneficial (What good does it do?). The former is a technical matter, a question of capability; the latter concerns values and policy, including whose values are to be served, including, as in Varheim’s chapter, governmental and industrial policy-making.

Cross-cutting insights. Comparison is needed in order to be able to identify what is, in fact, special to any given case; and comparison is also necessary if generalized insights are to be achieved.

A wider agenda. Documentation Studies overlaps in its interests with other existing fields, as has already been noted. Library and Information Studies has always been concerned with documents, but “Dokvit” is concerned with a wider range of documents, including performances. Media studies is concerned with analysis of the effects of new media, but “dockvit” remembers that all media were once new and includes preparation for a wider range of professional roles.

Process of institutionalization

This volume celebrates the first ten years of the “Dokvit” program at the University of Tromsø, but it should be mentioned that in addition to the usual involvement in conferences and projects, the leaders of the Tromsø program also organized a Document Summer School at Tromsø and, in collaboration with the School of Information at the University of California, Berkeley, a series of annual “DOCAM” conferences organized by the informal Document Academy. Several of the chapters in this book were developed from presentations at Document Academy conferences at Berkeley.

Relevance

Programs generally survive in universities if they are perceived as intellectually interesting and potentially useful in some way. The relevance of Documentation Studies in a document-permeated society cannot be in doubt. This volume brings insights from the world’s northernmost university. European artists long ago developed a preference for studios with northern windows. They found their work was better when performed in clear northern light.

References

Bishop, Ann P., Van House, Nancy, and Barbara P. Battenfield, 2003. *Digital Library Use: Social Practice in Design and Evaluation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Briet, Suzanne, 2006. *What is Documentation? English Translation of the Classic French Text*. Transl. and ed. by Ronald E. Day and Laurent Martinet. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Buckland, Michael, 1986. Education for librarianship in the next century. *Library Trends* 34, no 4 (Spring 1986), 777-788.

Buckland, Michael, 1996. Documentation, Information Science, and Library Science in the U.S.A. *Information Processing & Management* 32, 63-76. Reprinted in *Historical Studies in Information Science*, eds. Trudi B. Hahn, and Michael Buckland. Medford, NJ: Information Today, 159- 172.

Frohmann, Bernd, 2004. *Deflating Information: From Science Studies to Documentation*. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press.