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## DOCUMENTALITY BEYOND DOCUMENTS

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The question “What is a document?” received increased attention during the 1990s with a revival of interest in the ideas of Paul Otlet (1934) and Suzanne Briet (1951) and in arguments that any physical object might, in the right context, be regarded as evidence of something and, therefore, could be considered to be a “document.”<sup>1</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals that, in the past, “document” was used for oral communications, lessons, warnings, and, more generally, whatever is concerned with evidence or had an instructive effect. There has been some acceptance of this extended use of “document,” but also questions concerning the role of intentionality and some rejection.<sup>2</sup> Buckland (1991b) addressed the multiplicity of uses of the word “information” by suggesting that most of them could be sorted into three categories:

- Information-as-knowledge, meaning the knowledge imparted through communication;
- Information-as-process, the process of becoming informed;
- Information-as-thing, denoting bits, bytes, books, and other physical media.

The third category, the most prevalent use of the word “information,” includes any material thing or presentation (such as a radio announcement or television documentary) perceived as instructive. In this third sense, ‘information’ becomes a synonym for a broad view of ‘document.’<sup>3</sup> Against this background, three major views of “document” can be identified:

1. *The conventional, material view:* This sees documents as graphic records, usually of textual form, inscribed or displayed on a flat surface (clay tablet, paper, microfilm, computer screen) that are material, local, and, generally, transportable. These objects are *made as* documents. The limits of inclusion are unclear. Some have argued, for example, for the inclusion of terrestrial globes and of sculptures under this heading.
2. *An instrumental view:* On this view almost anything can be made to serve as a document, to signify something, to be held up as constituting evidence of some sort. Models, educational toys, natural history collections, and archaeological traces can be considered in this category. Before the adoption of military uniforms, it was hard for a soldier in battle to know who was friend and who was enemy. In a sixth-century battle between Welsh and Saxons, fought in a field of leeks, Saint David instructed the Welsh to indicate their identity to each other by wearing a leek as an emblem. The leek *documented* Welsh identity by providing a code to those who understood it and remains a national emblem of Wales. In modern English it would seem a stretch to refer to these leeks as “documents.” Nevertheless, in conveying a message in much the same way that textual labels would have, they performed as if they were documents.

Briet’s classic discussion of documentality in her manifesto *Qu’est-ce que la documentation?* famously asserted that a specimen of a newly discovered species of antelope, when positioned in a taxonomy and in a cage, was made to serve as a document (Briet 1951).

<sup>1</sup> Buckland (1991b); also Buckland (1991a; 1997); Day 2001.

<sup>2</sup> For example Robert (2010, 38–42). For background see Niels Windfeld Lund’s valuable review of the literature on document theory (Lund 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Buckland (1997) extended this discussion with historical background.

This view follows from her assertion that bibliography and documentation are properly considered to be concerned with access to evidence and not just with records. Briet focuses on objects *made into* documents or made to *serve as* documents.

3. *A semiotic view*: The two previous views emphasize the creation of documents and imply intentionality. Yet both are inadequate on a semiotic view in which anything could be *considered as* a document if it is regarded as evidence of something regardless of what its creator (if any) intended (if anything). This third view includes cases in which, unlike (2) and (3), there is no creative intent, including natural signs.

These three views—*made as*, *made into*, and *considered as*—are progressively more inclusive. The semiotic view is also significant because it calls into question definitions of documents as social objects (as in Ferraris [2013]). Although documents do ordinarily play a social role, a semiotic perception is inherently individual and can be quite idiosyncratic. The “social” definition of document is also inadequate for strictly private documents such as a secret diary, one’s own shopping list, or other aide-mémoire not intended for and possibly not intelligible to others. However, this difficulty is easily resolved if we use “cultural” instead of “social” since “culture” subsumes both individual and social behavior.

### 1. Frohmann’s Stories

In his “Revisiting ‘What is a document?’” Frohmann recommends moving away from a preoccupation with definitions and beginning instead—following suggestions of Putnam (2001)—with clear cases of things we agree to be documents, or activities we agree to be instances of documentation, and then telling stories in which new cases are introduced by analogy, similarity, and resemblance (Frohmann 2009, 296). He illustrates this approach by examining the documentary performance of cabinets of curiosities that were fashionable in sixteenth-century Europe. The *mélange* of strange objects was, both individually and collectively, well outside the conventional view of what a document is, yet they were used to convey a significant social meaning. In addition to considering possible documentary properties of objects not ordinarily considered documents, we also need to consider how our ideas about documents may need to evolve to accommodate electronic technologies. To do this we follow Frohmann’s advice, starting with a very respectable document, a passport.

### 2. A Passport

My passport is more powerful than I am in the sense that I cannot (legally) cross frontiers without it, but it can cross them without me. It is a small printed booklet that initially appears to be a typical example of the fixity of traditional media, an archetypal conventional document. The inside, however, is more complex with my handwritten signature and a photograph of me. Marks for optical character recognition inside the front cover and a bar code inside the back cover make it also a digital document capable of being read into computers. The pages began to fill up with marks stamped by frontier officials that chronicle my travels and additional pages were stitched in to accommodate more. Additional documents have been inserted: elaborate visas issued by the Chinese, Russian, and Vietnamese authorities which generated revenue for them and permission for me. A biometric security code was inserted at Heathrow and five small security stickers have been stuck on to the back cover. A more recently issued passport would also have included an RFID chip capable of transmitting my name, nationality, gender, date and place of birth, and my portrait.

My passport will expire and its expiration date, unlike mine, is exactly known and, unlike its bearer, my passport is easily renewed with a small fee. So although parts of my passport are carefully designed to prevent alteration, it is, in this and other respects, a dynamic object.

The social aspect of this document is clear when we remember that it is not the passport itself that allows me to cross frontiers or board airplanes, but guards enforcing regulations. In remote areas where there is no physical barrier I could cross a frontier with or without a passport; illegally perhaps, but still it could be done. If the frontier is not well marked, I might even cross it unintentionally. So the power of my passport does not arise simply from the document itself but from more-or-less well-enforced social

regulations within which passports are used as an evidentiary device within a system of controls. Strictly speaking, a government can only control (or try to control) its own borders, not those of other countries. But acceptance of the validity of my passport extends internationally through requests and agreements. I used to carry a British passport which had an impressive printed page elegantly inscribed with a statement reminiscent of a nineteenth-century imperial power: "Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State requests and requires in the name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary."

There is a cognitive aspect. A guard needs to examine the passport in order to be satisfied that the document is in order and that, judging from the description and portrait in it, it is, in fact, my passport and not someone else's. If a fake passport appeared to be in order and to belong to the bearer, then the traveler would be allowed to pass. Passports work on trust, not on truth. Since a false or altered passport would be trusted if it appeared correct, forged and stolen passports have value for individuals not eligible for a valid passport of the kind they would like or who prefer for some reason to travel using a false identity. In 1994 my passport was stolen when abroad and the local U.S. embassy issued me a replacement passport clearly marked as valid for one year only. It was later renewed, but the renewal statement was inserted on a page near the end of the document, so that for nine years this renewed passport appeared at first sight to have expired. Most guards noticed this expiration and looked for evidence of renewal, but a significant number did not. They expected passports to be current and did not examine this one carefully enough to notice that it had apparently expired.

Frontier guards now usually run the passport's machine-readable code through a reader and delegate verification to some remote machine that seeks validation in its records. In other words, the guardian role is delegated to machine-readable codes, reading devices, and machines programmed to respond to the encoded evidence. The human guard only needs to see that I resemble sufficiently the photographic portrait in the passport. Biometric technology has been developed to which that visual task could be delegated, so it is not hard to imagine a passport control station operating without any direct action by a human guard, much as grocery stores and libraries have experimented with self-service checkout.

This small printed booklet is a complex, dynamic, multimedia device with print, manuscript, and machine-readable scripts. It is carefully designed both to resist improper alteration and also to be changed in permitted ways. The passport plays a significant social role as a device used to control personal travel and it is also used to serve other purposes such as establishing one's identity when boarding an airplane or dealing with a bank.

The passport is evidence offered as a substitute for firsthand knowledge of a person's identity and citizenship. Its use depends on social regulations backed by military force, and yet also on cognitive activity: the guard has to read it and to believe that the passport is valid and that it is being used by the proper bearer. Finally, the machine-readable codes make it into a piece of machinery engaged in complex systems. Modern passports came into use a century ago. The role, complexity, and powerful affordances of my passport make it suitable emblem of contemporary society.

### *3. Identity Cards and Keys*

The passport is a document that we carry when we travel. What other documents are important enough to be carried? One is my driver license, which serves the same function within the United State as my passport does when I travel abroad. My portrait on it serves as evidence that I am who I claim to be. The status of its issuer, the California Department of Motor Vehicles, provides credible authority for what is, in practice, a general-purpose identity card.

In addition I carry another identity card issued by my employer. It resembles my driver license, but it differs in two ways. Less factual detail is displayed and it serves as an electronic card key that allows me to unlock the door to the building where I work. Again, this role is essentially the same as that of the passport. It allows me to go somewhere that I could not go without it. The difference is that there is no human guard at the door. The role of guardian is delegated to the locked door and to the machinery of the lock which recognizes approved identity cards and briefly unlocks the door. That it is delegated from a human guard to a mechanical guarding mechanism changes the procedure but not the relationship. We

have no difficulty in considering this plastic card as a document, as an object adducing evidence of identity. So, here again, like the passport, it is a document that functions in two ways: It offers humanly visible evidence for all to see and it also, by incorporating an encoded record, performs the guardian role by inducing a preprogrammed response in a situation of security in a way that is far less expensive than providing a human guard.

Previously, these two functions were separate. The employee identity card did not also operate as a card key. I had a separate encoded card that served as a key and had no other role. So I carried both the university identity card and the separate card key. The roles of the two, taken together, were no different from what they are now that they have been combined into a single card. So as long as we can accept that humans delegate work to machinery, there seems no reason not to accept that the separate card key functioned as a kind of document.

We can push this reasoning further. Once inside the building, I use a traditional metal key to open the door to the room where I have my desk. A metal key does not fit within any conventional view of a document, but it does perform the same function as the card key and the passport. That it uses as means a carefully shaped piece of metal instead of an electromagnetic pattern on a plastic card (as a card key does) or inscribed paper (as the passport does) is a detail of implementation that is generally irrelevant to the shared purpose for which all three were designed. There are, of course, some differences in performance. The metal key is more robust than the card key, but otherwise the similarities are strong. If either is lost, it can be disabled by modifying the lock. The metal key has my employer's name stamped on it to identify the issuer. It also bears the instruction 'Do not duplicate' and codes that can be used (by those who know what they mean) to indicate both which lock it opens and to whom the key was issued. It is functioning as my passport does. The policy is that when the building is locked, people with keys should not admit any strangers who do not themselves have a key.

#### 4. Conclusions

It is reasonable to consider any object that has documentary characteristics as a document; but, of course, that does not mean that it should be considered always and only in this way. A leek is not always and only an emblem of Welshness. The same is true in reverse: even an archetypal document, a printed book, can make a convenient doorstop, a role that depends on its physicality, not on any documentary aspect.

Following Frohmann's admonition to tell stories allows us to make clearer the difference between a declarative approach based on established usage that *this* is a "document" and *that* is not, and an exploratory approach that seeks to examine the characteristics and roles of instances of documents and how these characteristics and roles are shared with or interact with other objects not (or not yet) regarded as "documents." We find that a shared characteristic of documents in both conventional and extended senses is that they exhibit some kind of code.

An exploratory path enables us to look back along the path taken and to provide a better understanding of the present and possible future of roles of documents in a changing world. The rise of textual documents required literacy, with consequences that have been much discussed. Now with digital technology, literacy is not enough because documentary codes are increasingly out-of-sight or unintelligible. This increases the need to understand how documentality extends beyond conventional documents.

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