

THE NATURE AND QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT IN ARCHIVES, LIBRARIES, INFORMATION CENTRES AND MUSEUMS

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the referential and formal value of information contained in archives, libraries, information centres and museums. After analysing its most salient features and their theoretical import regarding the informative-documentary process, its nature is studied from the informative and semiotic viewpoints. Finally, these defining characteristics are summarised into a provisional definition of the document, valid for the information contained in the aforementioned institutions.

INTRODUCTION

One of the basic endeavours of Library and Information Science theory lies in the analysis of the processing of information in archives, libraries, information centres and museums, with the aim of unveiling the principles that govern these processes. For this to be possible, however, we need an adequate definition of the term 'document' -the object of these processes. Only in this way will we pursue a theory of Information Science which is consequent with its foremost defining element.

We will use as a starting point the informative character that singularises any documentary process epistemologically (López Yepes, 1995: 153-253) and the value attached to the document as an information source (Buckland, 1991: 355, Desantes Guanter, 1987: 47). We will then study the particular features of those documents contained in archives, libraries and information centres as well as museums¹, in terms of their representativeness (the phenomena or beings they represent, i.e. what their referents are, and how they are expressed).

Once we have discussed these parameters, which we may describe as semantic values (insofar as they refer to a content and associated form), we will synthesise their common characteristics into a provisional definition of the document.

THE ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

There is a clear absence of agreement among specialists as to a definition of the 'archive document' (Martínez Comeche, 1997: 213). This is due to the spe-

cific nature and goals of Archive Science, which focuses not so much on the content of each piece of information as on the information generated by their grouping at different levels. The co-existence of different levels of information leads to different conceptions of the 'archive document', depending on the adopted level.

In order to overcome this difficulty, we will assume that all informative value has the first possible information level as its source. In other words, the informative nature of the archive document is found in its role of accounting of a juridical or administrative process. Without this first level of informative significance, any subsequent value to the document is not possible. With this premise in mind, we can now focus our attention on the nucleus of the traditional definition of the juridical document, as expressed by the Roman jurist Paulo (Martín-Pozuelo Campillos, 1996: 93). In his conception, the 'archive document' is an account (whether written or not) aimed at representing (with sufficient guarantees) an event, process or act of administrative or juridical nature.

Regarding the modes of representation of these events, processes or acts of administrative or juridical nature, the 'archive document' has a wide range of possibilities of expression. In the words of Vicenta Cortés Alonso (1982: 61), "from a speech pronounced by the mayor we can obtain the original manuscript, a typed version of it, its publication on a bulletin, the film of its delivery, and the (sound) recording of the act and its magnetic version in a data base. All these units [...] of the same document should reach the archive in their original form, for they are all 'fileable' pieces".

We have thus observed that (1) the 'archive document's basic referent consists in an event, process or act of administrative or juridical nature, and that (2) this referent can be expressed in manifold ways, originating textual, graphical, audio-visual and electronic documents.

THE DOCUMENT OF LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION CENTRES

From the point of view of its representativeness, it is possible to analyse the library document and that of information centres as one single reality. Experience shows that the same document can be collected in

either institution, or simultaneously in both, due to the radical resemblance in their semantic values. We will thus refer to them, indistinctly, as 'library documents'.

The most general framework in which to study representativeness in 'library documents' mirrors the cultural anthropological way of document conceptualisation, outlined, among others, by López Yepes (1977: 13-28) and Paul Otlet (1934: 43). For these authors, the apparition of the document must be understood essentially as an apprehension of the environment. In this way, materials contained within libraries and information centres can ultimately be conceived as representing their creators' personal perceptions of their respective surrounding realities. To use Otlet's words, "the ensemble of books constitutes humanity's materialised memory, registering (that is, representing) day by day the events, ideas, actions, feelings, dreams -whatever they may be- that have informed the human mind".

As to the physical mode of representation that the 'library document' can adopt, it can be said that its range is as wide as that of the 'archive document'. Summarising the general viewpoint shared by most experts in the field, Núria Amat (1994: 33) affirms that "the physical embodiment of the document is independent of its content [...] They can be classified as: textual or printed (paper medium), micrographic (microfilm and microform), audio-visual (video, films, etc.), magnetic (magnetic tape, magnetic disk, diskettes, etc.), optic (CD-ROM and others) and electronic (on-line databases -ASCII- and videotex, etc.)".

The 'library document' is therefore characterised by (1) a referent that captures all that may possibly inform the human mind, and (2) the capacity of expressing such referents in a variety of ways, giving rise to textual, graphic, audio-visual, magnetic, optic and electronic documents.

THE MUSEUM DOCUMENT

If the representativeness proper to a 'library document' is characterised by its generality, the 'museum document' shares no less in this quality -at least according to the opinion of the international agencies and experts that have dealt with this matter.

Accordingly, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines the museum as that "permanent institution, not profit-oriented, who serves society by conserving, communicating and presenting material accounts of man and his medium, for study, educational and enjoyment purposes" (Quoted by Hernández Hernández, 1994: 69).

The latter part of the definition refers to the representative or evidential value of the "museum document", reaching any aspect related to the human

being and his or her surroundings. Hence, in words of Andrés Carretero Pérez (1997: 12), "all that excites our interest, the entire planet, can be found in museums".

We can thus derive, from these texts, the formal and referential particularities proper to the 'museum document': (1) regarding the object of representation, everything possibly related to the human being and his or her environment, (2) regarding the mode of representation, it suffices that it be embodied materially, in such way that any physical entity (alive or not) may be included in principle.

Such a broad focus may seem, at first sight, somewhat strange. Nevertheless, for our present-day Museum Science (a science pioneered in the later sixties, and having George H. Riviére (1993) as one of his most important representatives) any physical entity (alive or not) can be treated as a 'museum document', as long as it represent the human being and his or her environment. The ICOM, furthermore, has followed the postulates of the New Museum Science, by granting museum status to institutions exhibiting living beings, such as zoos and botanical gardens, since 1974, and to natural parks, since 1983.

CONSEQUENCES REGARDING THE DOCUMENT'S CONCEPTUALISATION

From what has been said so far, we can single out a number of conclusions regarding the conceptualisation of archive, library, information centre and museum documents. These regard both their conceptualisation and the documentary process carried out within each institution. They are as follows:

- (1) The indefinite semantic extension of the term 'document'. This quality makes its conceptualisation from this point of reference hardly attainable. We must indeed recognise the fact that absolutely anything can be represented by the documents stored in these institutions. These can range from events, thoughts, feelings and perceptions to nature in its wholeness and the human being, regardless of its specific spatial and temporal co-ordinates.
- (2) Likewise, there are no limits as to possible modes of representation. In this way, any physical entity (alive or not) can be catalogued as a document, and thus treated and stored as such. It is thereby easier to share Suzanne Briet's opinion (1951: 7-8) that a text, a graphic or audio-visual material, an object and a living being can physically represent the same referent (in this case, an animal species). "[A] living animal", she writes, "is captured and catalogued ([kept] in a zoological garden). After its death, it will be dissected and preserved (in a mu-

seum). A film of it can be shot; its sound can be recorded. The catalogued animal is a primary document, while the other documents are derived or secondary forms."

- (3) Nevertheless, the French information scientist does not consider any living animal as a document. To adopt the proper documentary character, the animal must be catalogued and exhibited in a zoological collection. With this distinction, Briet is pointing us towards the potentially documentary nature of any physical entity. However, it will only become one once it is used representatively, i.e. in referring it to any physical or intellectual phenomenon (e.g., a specific animal species).

From what has been said, we can derive two consequences of significant theoretical import: (1) nothing is a document in itself, but anything can potentially be one; and (2) it will become one once it is employed to represent an event, thought or phenomenon pertaining to nature or humankind. In other words, it is this representativeness that draws the line between the 'potential document' and the 'effective document'. This distinction has already been discussed (although with different nuances) by Antonio Luis García Gutiérrez (1984: 33), through the pre-document/document duality. The relevance of this discrimination in terms of potency and act has been dealt with by Desantes Guanter (1987: 48).

- (4) The possibility of a concurrence of different modes of representation around one same referent is especially relevant to information science. For it is indeed the case that any document-related institution is limited in its compiling capacity: (1) firstly, it can only store spatial and temporally accessible physical entities; and (2) secondly, a great manageability is needed to treat and expose these entities.

The first limitation (accessibility) adds a further defining characteristic to the document: it must exist within a permanent medium that will guarantee its physical integrity.

The second limitation (manageability) has a wider practical import. It defines institutional ability to carry out new representations of the "initial document" (in Suzanne Briet's terminology), as many as needed in order to guarantee its entry (whenever appropriate), convenient treatment and effective exposure to the public.

If the "initial document" is embodied within a permanent and manageable medium (a book,

a sculpture) entry to the institution can be direct. Of course, the institution may then produce new representations of this document in order to assure an adequate treatment and exposure. Similarly to what constitutes a common daily practice in museums and libraries, these representations may be linguistic, audiovisual, graphic or electronic.

Even if the "initial document" does not fulfill one of the limitations (a living animal, for example), this does not automatically preclude documentary institutions from pursuing its entry. It suffices that they produce a new representation of the "initial document" (photograph or film) that can be entered directly. Likewise, this new document can be further treated, including the production of subsequent representations (linguistic, graphic or electronic) that will ensure an adequate treatment and exposure of it.

This phenomenon whereby documentary institutions produce manifold representations of one same document is yet another proof of the relevance of Library and Information Science as an informative mode (Desantes Guanter, 1987: 261-370). This significance is materialised through the creation of "primary documents" (when representation is synonymous of entry of the physical entity into the institution) and of "secondary documents" (when representation takes place during the storage phase), following a terminology and documentary process scheme that we have already outlined elsewhere (Martínez Comeche, 1996: 41).

- (5) Granted that the representativeness that makes any physical entity a document is determined externally, we must also see in the document: (1) the presence of a human agent, that imposes it; (2) to the entity itself; (3) with a specific referential value; (4) the phenomenon being located in specific spatial-temporal coordinates. It thus becomes necessary to understand the presence of space and time in the documentary phenomenon: (1) the referent (event, thought, phenomenon related to the human being and his or her surroundings) lacks any spatial or temporal limitations -it can be related to the present, the past or the future, as well as to any point in space. Nevertheless, (2) the actual representation is rendered effective or real by somebody in a specific moment in time at a specific place. In other words, every representation is intrinsically circumstantial. As Desantes Guanter (1987: 263)

has underlined, any type of information "takes place here and now, in a given space and time. These two, together with the intended audience of the information, constitute its three determining co-ordinates."

- (6) The human agent's influence in the informative process is especially relevant. Given a specific document, users can impose very different referents to those established by the institutions. We can conclude from this reality that:

(1) Firstly, we can refer to the document in its relationship to the three possible human agents that participate in the process. It is thus possible to distinguish between the "emitting document", "mediate document" and "receptive document", differing in their respective representative or referential values. (2) Secondly, a given physical entity can give rise to an unlimited number of "receptive documents". The latter exhibits what is indeed a multi-faceted nature. This phenomenon brings to the fore the transcendence and difficulty of Library and Information Science as a mode of information. The ideal purpose of this science would be to bridge the "emitting" and "mediate" documents to the largest possible number of potential "receptive" documents.

THE DOCUMENT AS INFORMATION

As we have seen, the indetermination that seems consubstantial to the document is derived from the spatial-temporal limitations set on it from the very time of its conception. This leads us to consider the use that human beings give documents, or to study them from the functional standpoint.

Such focus was pioneered by Paul Otlet (1934: 43) in the earlier part of the century. Otlet suggested a number of purposes to any given document (research, culture, learning, information and recreation), to which we could add many others: a human being who reads a book or observes a sculpture for the sake of aesthetic pleasure, a user who requests a copy of a specific document in order to defend his or her rights, someone wishing to know where he or she can buy a given article at a lower price...

Although the functional approach seems to suggest a level of indetermination to the document similar to that discussed above, Otlet (1934: 216-217) pointed us toward a possible resolution of the conflict. He suggested the limiting of the document's purpose to one of exclusively informative character. This suggestion, supported by Suzanne Briet (1951: 7), although it recognises representativeness as an essential attribute of the document and an indetermination derived

from the semantic point of view, is not free of its own problems. Firstly (1), both Otlet and Briet appear to be defending a restrictive interpretation of the term 'to inform' ("evidence or reconstruction of a physical or intellectual phenomenon"), associating the informative end exclusively to science and research. Secondly, (2) neither Otlet nor Briet discuss the possibility of linking other possible purposes of the document (cultural, economic or aesthetic) to the merely informative one.

At this point, however, specialists introduce an important distinction. Going further than the informative end proper, they recognise that the document is synonymous of information. Evidence of this can be found in the many definitions that equate the document to a specific type of information, usually registered information or knowledge (López Yepes, 1995: 116-166; Cf. Buckland, 1991: 355). In our view, identifying document and information does not help resolve the dilemma posed by its conceptualisation -it even makes it harder to address, due to the lack of consensus and difficulties surrounding a definition of 'information'. These problems suggest a return to Otlet's functional focus, while addressing the problems it raises.

One approach to their resolution would be centred around a twofold distinction regarding the ends of the document: (1) the informative end, as a primary or immediate one, the only common to every document and that must thereby appear in its definition; and (2) an ultimate or mediate end, indeterminate and variable, imposed by each user, that must therefore not appear in the document's definition.

Similarly, from the functional viewpoint, and without referring to any definition of the term 'information', we could assimilate the term 'to inform' to the concept 'let something useful be known' (conceived in a very generic fashion, as the finding or affirming of something adequate, convenient, or simply pertinent or related to some end). This view of the term 'to inform' is, on the other hand, not novel (see Codina, 1996: 191).

Following these premises, we could summarise the informative character of the document by the statement that the document ought to, as its immediate end, let someone know something useful (that which it represents), in relation to any of the ultimate human purposes (aesthetic, economic, administrative, cultural, etc.).

We must acknowledge that this purpose may not be shared by each and every human agent involved in the process. An artisan who manufactures a vase out of clay, far from willing to represent anything, aims at the satisfaction of a practical need (transporting water). One of the paintings at Altamira (Spain), for example, could have been for the original artist no

more than a representation of preys, with the intention of favouring the success of the hunting endeavour through the use of some form of magic ritual. If this were to be the case, the artist represented the desired preys with an immediate purpose of magical, not informative, character. In these spatial-temporal circumstances, neither the artisan nor the hunter created documents (the 'emitting document' is missing). Contrariwise, when a writer produces a text with the aim of representing his or her thought, thereby providing something at least potentially useful to understand reality, an 'emitting document' is being created.

With time, however, a person will regard the depictions as representations of a rite of magic. What is more, these representations will serve as evidence of the importance of magic in primitive societies. In such case, the archaeologist is employing the art at Altamira as a "receptive document". On the other hand, if someone uses a scientific text to build a fire that will warm him up, he is not generating a "receptive document", but using it for combustion purposes. As affirmed by Sagredo Fernández and Izquierdo Arroyo (1983: 265), it is the element of "use" that is most decisive in the documentary process.

Therefore, we must include this phenomenon in any formulation of the concept of document. It must be specified that a document arises only when it is used by the emitter, the medium or the receiver with an informative end in mind.

SEMIOTICS OF THE DOCUMENT

What are the most common-place definitions of the term 'sign' can be summarised in the Scholastic *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, that is, "something which represents or substitutes something else" (Boon, 1986: 936). In such a way, a document's representativeness can be analysed from the point of view of semiotics.

We will base ourselves in the classification of signs proposed by Charles S. Peirce (1987: 250-262). From this ordering, we can infer that the definition of an icon can be applied to any item in a museum. A clay vase, for example, can be regarded as an icon representing the manifold small, concave, clay productions of humankind in a given place and moment in history. Similarly, in Peirce's own words (1987: 263), "any artwork (conventional as its method may be) is essentially a representation of this [iconic] class." The subject-matter of the artwork is irrelevant to this respect. As the author puts it (Peirce, 1987: 274), "it would possess the signifying characteristic even if its object were non-existent".

Likewise, in Peirce's opinion (1987: 270), "every word, sentence, book or other conventional sign is a Symbol". This would include the textual documents that make up archives, libraries and museums.

In terms of indexes, Peirce classifies them using "three characteristic features. Firstly, they share no physical resemblance to their objects. Secondly, they refer to single individuals or units. Thirdly, they direct attention towards its objects by means of a blind compulsion." Thus, he says (1987: 276), "it would be difficult, if not impossible, to give an instance of an absolutely pure index [...] Psychologically, the effects proper to the use of indexes is dependent upon association by contiguity, not by resemblance, or other intellectual operations."

DEFINITION OF DOCUMENT

In terms of the above discussion, and conceiving a message as a grouping of signs established following set combination rules (Martínez Comeche, 1995: 42), there is no obstacle to the conceptualisation of the archive, library, information centre and museum document as an iconic or symbolic message.

However, we must also consider the fact that a document collected in one of these documentary institutions can be composed of one or various messages. For example, think of a specific file that can have many partial messages concerning a single request, or a magazine issue including a number of heterogeneous articles, or a museum ensemble grouping together a variety of items around a common relation. Hence, a definition of the document must incorporate the possibility of a union of several messages as a single document. This unity is, of course, externally imposed by the information professional.

We can now attempt to combine our conclusions about the characteristics of the constituting elements of a document with the documentary defining qualities common to archives, libraries, information centres and museums into a single formulation that will be valid for any of these institutions. A document is an iconic or symbolic message(s), permanently incorporated in a medium (as this incorporation exists), and used by the emitter, the mediator or the receiver for an information-related purpose.

NOTE

¹ An information science perspective will lead us to recognise that, say, a sculpture may inform a user as much (if not more) than its textual description.

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