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Understanding documents and documentation

David Bawden

Summary
Despite the centrality and importance of the concept for the information sciences, there is scope for very varied understanding of 'document'. (7 refs.)
Keywords: document, definition of; document, terminology

Given the title of this journal, it will be clear that most of its contents will be 'about' documentation. In turn this implies that they will be about documents.

One of the articles in this issue deals with the evolution of documents, and hence, necessarily, with their explicit nature. This, however, is the exception rather than the rule. It is something of a paradox that information specialists - whether they choose to call themselves information scientists, librarians, or even knowledge managers - spend little time debating the nature of the information and knowledge with which they deal, and disagree when they do so debate (see, for example, Bawden 2001 and Kay 1995)

It is a little strange to find that there is still dispute, and lack of consideration, about the nature of these fundamental ideas: perhaps as strange as finding a doctor who no idea what a 'disease' or a 'treatment' was, or an engineer who had no idea what was meant by 'materials' or 'design'. That is not to say that there need be a perfect understanding of these concepts; doctors treated diseases, albeit not always very effectively, long before they had an realistic idea of what caused them. But most professions have some understanding of the basic concepts with which they deal.

'Information' and 'knowledge', however, are tricky concepts, which can have many different meanings, and can be understood in many different ways. These are not just academic matters; they can have a real effect on professional practice. What someone understands by 'knowledge', for example, and its relation to 'information', will determine how they go about the practical business of 'knowledge management'.

The same, of course, is true for 'document'; what a librarian understands by a 'document' will determine what kinds of thing they keep on their shelves or in their computer files. And 'document' also is a term which can be understood in various ways, though not, perhaps, quite as widely as 'information'.

It might be thought that the meaning of 'document' is straightforward, and that the only issues that can arise relate to the differences between printed and electronic documents. This is far from the case. It can be argued that, if a 'document' is some physical thing which records thoughts or ideas - information - then we should include paintings, sculpture, and perhaps even any artefact, as documents. But then, what about geological specimens in museums, or living animals in zoos ? They are physical evidence, which may be studied, and which may - in a sense - communicate information. Should they be treated as documents ? Buckland (1997) gives a good concise review of these issues.

Even if we restrict ourselves, as most information specialists might wish, to seeing documents as being some physical item deliberately created for the purpose of conveying information, we still find some difficulties. In particular, we may have a problem deciding when two documents are 'the same'. If I have a copy of a textbook, and you have a copy of the same edition of the same book, then these are clearly different objects. But in a library catalogue they will be treated as two examples of the same document. What if the book is translated, word for word, as precisely as possible, into another language: is the same document, or different ? At what point do an author's ideas, on their way to becoming a published book, become a 'document' ?

These are quite difficult issues philosophically, and pose real practical problems, for example, for library cataloguing codes and systems. They have led to the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) model, which is beginning to make an impact on cataloguing

systems and practices (IFLA 1998). FRBR distinguishes four levels - work, expression, manifestation and item - spanning the 'space' from an abstract intellectual conception to a specific physical item, the 'book in hand'. All of these are arguably documents in some sense, and there has been scope for much disagreement on how these four levels should be understood (see, for example, Jonsson 2003). It seems that much of this ambiguity stems from the basic question of what is a document and, similarly, what is a 'work' (see, for example, Smiraglia 2002, 2003).

Definition and explanation of terms is sometimes seen as a rather sterile activity, particularly in a subject with a strong practical and vocational component. This is, I consider, far from the case here. What we understand by a 'document', and how this understanding changes over time, has great effects on the principles and practices of the information sciences, and the practical disciplines which they underpin. It is a topic which this Journal will continue to devote space to, and we welcome contributions - both full articles and shorter contributions - which contribute to its debate.

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