DOCUMENTALITY AND READERS

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ABSTRACT

The function of the library is to collect, preserve, and provide access to recorded human communication. “Documentality” is an umbrella term that embraces the complexity and scope of this enterprise. By definition, the artifacts of recorded human communication are technology dependent, language dependent, and socially constructed. These factors impact and constrain the message contained in the recordings. This poster highlights a few of the challenges and suggests some principles for how we should think about this source of information.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Documents are objects created by one person in order to communicate something to another person. The inherent nature of documents operates with a number of key limitations. Information Literacy is the skill set by which the reader derives veridical meaning from the text. What are the difficulties and how do they impact “dialogue”?

A DEFINITION OF DOCUMENTALITY

“Documentality” carries the discussion to another level by asking what makes for a document. What all can librarians classify as documents? From within the library profession, Briet (1951) offered an influential examination of this question in 1951, and “documentality” is a transmutation of the French concept, “documentalité.” She concluded her argument by suggesting that any object could be a document if it was in any way acted upon by one person to communicate something to another person. Her famous example is the antelope. While the antelope is roaming free in the African plains, it is not a document. But should it be captured and placed in a zoo, it becomes a document. It may have been acted upon by a person, the zookeeper, for the intention of communicating with another person, the visitor, a physical experience of the antelope. The cycle continues as the antelope dies, stuffed and placed in a museum, as zoological reports and studies of the specimen are published, and so forth. Thus a “document” is the reified and commodified product of human

INFORMATION LITERACY

In its simplest iteration, information literacy is the ability to identify, find, evaluate, and use information. To apply this definition to pedagogy in higher education, the Association of College and Research Libraries (2016) adopted standards that guided library instruction. While practical and easy to measure, these standards did not suffice. So in 2016, the Association of College and Research Libraries adopted a much more complex understanding that embraces the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication.

“Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.” (ACRL, 2016)

Thus the historical trajectory of library instruction as gone from “which is the best book” to “how to use the computer” to “how to think about information.”

LIMITATIONS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Much of the conversation around information literacy focuses on the impact of information seeking in learning. In the documentality model of communication between author and reader, weak information literacy skills can be analogous to noise that obscures the successful transmission of knowledge, as on a telephone line. It may require intentional effort by the reader to accurately understand the text. This challenge is exacerbated by time, distance, and language. It requires much more effort to read and understand a text written in the first century from Asia Minor in Greek than a work written in the twenty-first century by my neighbor in my first language. Beyond that obvious point, there are a number of other limitations with documentary communication.

Language is linear. One word must follow another. One idea must follow another. Accurate interpretation includes plotting the ideas on a map. The tacit preferred path of the reader may not correspond to the author’s. The reader may perceive gaps and detours in the author’s line of thinking. The author may assume the reader already shares a knowledge base that the reader does not have.

Space is limited. An author must select a finite number of knowledge units in constructing an argument. It is never possible to give expression to everything an expert knows on a subject in a single media instance. No single document completely includes all relevant information. No movie can simultaneously play all the relevant scenes.

Intended audience defines a number of factors, including vocabulary, illustration, metaphor, and so forth. These may or may not be obvious to someone from a different time, place, or culture.

AUTHOR—READER CONNECTION

A common image of the writer portrays her as a solitary individual grappling with great ideas. Yet this essay on documentality teases out another dimension. Writing might be a solitary act, but lives in hope of a reader. Without a reader, writing a document might as well have never been attempted. So the writer not only strives to put ink on paper, but to engage their readers, to speak their language, to map the course from where they are to where they might be, to be a bridge from the darkness of unknowing to the light of knowing. However, the connection between the mind of the author and the mind of the reader is not direct. When someone reads a text, it is read using the cognitive structures of the reader, not the writer. This suggests that a reader will find in the text what they expect to find, and will interpret the content in light of their own expectations.

In response, information literacy skills bring to the reading a grounded, intentional, and savvy mindset that critically engages the text to control for these types of tacit influences.

CONFRONTING THE NOISE

All of these limitations and more generate noise between the author and the reader. On top of that is the realization that when someone reads a text, it is read using the cognitive structures of the reader, not the writer. This suggests that a reader will find in the text what they expect to find, and will interpret the content in light of their own expectations. The resulting interpretation may or may not be compatible with the intentions of the author. (Jolley, 2018). In response, information literacy skills bring to the reading a grounded, intentional, and savvy mindset that critically engages the text to control for these types of tacit influences.

REFERENCES


From the 1534 Luther Bible

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