Document phenomenology: a framework for holistic analysis

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to advance document ontology and epistemology by proposing a framework for analysing documents from multiple perspectives of research and practice. Design/methodology/approach – Understanding is positioned as an epistemic aim of documents

Keywords - Phenomenology, Document analysis, Document experience, Document handling, Document systems, Properties of documentary practice

Paper type - Conceptual paper

Introduction

Do documents exist? Or, perhaps more to the point: how do documents exist?

Questions about existence are, of course, not unique to documents, as evidenced by the sprawling literature in ontological philosophy. Yet, as Heidegger (1927/2010) pointed out, most of this inquiry assumes existence as a fait accompli and is more interested in questions regarding, for instance, classification. In Heidegger's terms, traditional ontology asks questions about beings, not about being.

With documents, assuming existence as self-evident – failing to ask about being – raises a host of issues. If a document is taken to be anything that furnishes evidence or proof of something (Buckland, 1997) , how is it that objects become documents? And why do some things become documents while others do not? How can we account for, to give Meyriat's (1981) example, Napoleon's letters, which furnished one sort of proof

What is holistic analysis?

Analysis is a detailed examination of the elements or structure of something. It is a way to break something into its parts to make the appreciation of it more manageable. At its best, analysis should be done with the constant self-reminder that the parts belong to a whole. This recalls Hegel's (1807/2005) ideal view of scientific development as the cycle of first breaking down concepts into ever-smaller categories, and then putting them back together to gain a holistic understanding.

This vision notwithstanding, sometimes analysis loses the forest for the trees. We use the term holistic analysis to serve as a reminder that all parts that are analysed should be considered not only in and of themselves, but also in relation to each other as parts of an interconnected whole. Moreover, as will be seen further on, entities that may seem "whole" in themselves can, in turn, be seen as parts of progressively more complex wholes

Act One: documental becoming

A document is only truly a document when an information object is perceived by an agent in a particular context. With no agent, the "document" – what Couzinet (2015) called a "dormant document" – is merely an information object. In the most typical case of a document, the information object is a physical object, and the agent is a human being. Thus, in this paper we use "person" and "object" as a kind of shorthand, not denying that other types of documents exist (e.g. animal-object, person-person).

When the person and the object come together (in present reality, in memory, or in imagination), a transaction occurs (Wood and Latham, 2014). This transaction entails the momentary "fusion" of two whole beings: the person and the object. Thus, in this framework, the object of analysis is always person plus object. The documental transaction has been viewed as the individual's "experience" of the document (Latham, 2014). The term experience here is drawn from Dewey's (1934/2005) aesthetics. For Dewey, "an experience" is singular and meaningful, marked off from the banal procession of everyday experience. Dewey used the term transaction to describe such marked experiences; we extend the use of this term to characterize the coming together of person and object in all documents. Latham (2014) offered a framework for dissecting document experiences, in the form of a continuum of possible experiences with a document that range from efferent (cognitive, logical, intellectual) on one end and aesthetic (emotional, spiritual, holistic) on the other end. Here we add further nuance to that characterization

Making meaning from information

Buckland (1997) described documents as being made from the human processing of objects. The first part of this processing is the ascertaining of information through the senses and memory, as described above. Immediately and simultaneously, this ascertaining gives way to meaning-making: the construction of meaning from information.

References

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