Documentation Theory
for Information Governance

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Documentation the Emblem of Modern Society?
Documentation is a central feature of the contemporary world. We are immersed in documents in nearly every sphere of life and constantly engage with them. Our lives, in many ways, are "document-pervaded."[i] Documents are created, deployed, and used to help us communicate, organize, control, discipline, monitor, and represent many aspects of information, institutions, and individuals.

We have a seemingly inherent need to record our lives into diverse kinds of documents that, in turn, we increasingly depend upon to interpret, understand, navigate, and shape the world around us. This need for and dependence upon documentation is arguably the signature cultural technique of our time; or put differently, documentation is the emblem of modern society.[ii]

Most institutions – governmental and corporate, public and private – rest and rely upon documentation to enable and facilitate their activities, operations, transactions, and other functions. Documents are the lifeblood of institutions.[iii] Most institutions are "unthinkable, impracticable, not feasible without documents: messages, memoranda, laws, statements, diplomatic briefs, warrants, reports, white papers, submissions, applications, records, minutes of meetings, job descriptions, letters of guidance, press releases, bills, budgets, and accounts."[iv] Further, "the practices of government [and other public and private institutions] become formal or official to the extent that they are documented."[v] Most institutions deal with a diversity of documents that, in turn, demand different kinds of practices with them, including designing, composing, circulating, reading, viewing, discussing, organizing, filing, managing, retaining, preserving, and otherwise using them.

Yet, despite our need for and use of documents, and their subsequent ubiquitous presence, we remain largely blinded to them; or, as David Levy observes, we are inured to the documents we use and that surround us.[vi] We are so used to dealing with documents that we seemingly take them for granted or at least overlook their importance in our lives. Many people tend to concentrate on the information instantiated – that is, inscribed and contained in and made tangible – by documents instead of the documents themselves as material objects. This focus

focus on information, or as some scholars describe as a privileging of information, [v11] effectively renders documents as unimportant or disposable items. Information is treated as though it is indifferent to its documentation. The importance of documents as material objects, in addition to the importance of our practices that are afforded by – that is, made possible by – this materiality, are rarely recognized or, at best, considered of marginal interest.

But what exactly is documentation? What are these material objects that surround us and that we depend upon to help organize, navigate, interpret, understand, and shape our world? What is it that we are creating, collecting, generating, consuming, organizing, managing, preserving, and otherwise using? There are often various related, but different, terms conflated with "documentation," including "information," "record," "file," and in some cases "database." What are the distinctions between these terms and why are they important to recognize?

This article aims to consider what a documentary focus can offer to the practices and understandings of information governance. It specifically argues that documentation theory can help to expand, and thereby more fully illuminate, the foundation and diversity of this profession. It takes Marc Kosciejew's material-documentary literacy framework [viii] as its point of departure for this article's conceptual conversation on documents, specifically approaching and analyzing objects as documents. This framework "places a specific document, or documents, at the center of observation, study, and analysis and thereby develops documentary dialogues about and for it, uses the document to better illuminate its contexts, and integrates the document in teaching and researching [and managing] information."[ix] Using this framework as a device for shaping the following discussion, this article helps shift focus from information to documentation; specifically, it reorients considerations of information to

considerations of the documents that materialize and make possible information that is, in turn, organized, managed, preserved, and otherwise used for diverse purposes in information governance and beyond.

It is important to note that this article does not claim that a documentary focus is a major departure from conventional scholarly or professional approaches to information governance, or even to information generally. It instead provides a different, indeed overlooked, angle – a documentary focus – in which to situate discussions and practices with information. A documentary focus "traverses disciplinary [and practical] boundaries to illuminate the many important roles that documentation plays in most areas of life and society. It also helps to better illuminate diverse kinds of information, and the way in which information is materialized."[x] This article's documentary focus shows documentation's central position in information governance and sheds light on the diverse kinds of documents and practices that deal with information.

The following discussion is arranged into three main sections. The first section presents definitions of three significant terms used in information governance, namely "record," "information," and "document." These definitions, drawn from the scholarly literature on theories of information and documentation, also illuminate the important distinctions between these terms. This section further argues that the term of "documentation" can serve as an overarching, indeed unifying, concept for the profession's focus. The second section begins a conceptual documentary approach to objects, and, by extension, information. It presents some possible pathways to take in which to more fully understand the features and effects of documentation and also discusses the usefulness of this approach to information and our practices with it. The third and concluding section calls for more documentary considerations of information. Let us first turn to distinguishing between three often conflated terms: information, records, and documentation.

Distinctions between Information, Records, and Documentation

The terms "information," "record," and "documentation" are often used synonymously as each one focuses on evidence, broadly understood; however, they have divergent concerns and perspectives on the nature of evidence.[xi] The term "information" covers any phenomena, including physical or digital objects, intangible knowledge, events, and nearly everything that could be considered as informative. In this sense, "information" is closely aligned with "evidence" as it can be regarded as evidence of something. The term "record" concentrates on evidence that is created, used, and required for organizational activities and affairs. In this sense, "record" is mainly concerned with the documents needed in and for the business of various kinds of public and private institutions.

Arguably, these two terms are conceptually and practically limiting. "Information" is limiting because it usually does not account for the central role that materiality – that is, physical components and characteristics of items – plays in its emergence as tangible items. This limitation therefore conceptually neglects materiality, and, practically, overlooks how materiality determines and disciplines practices with information. "Record" is limiting due to its narrow focus on information-bearing objects created, maintained, and used by institutions. This limitation conceptually excludes the diversity of items beyond organizational settings and can even undermine understandings of increasingly dynamic, interactive, and pervasive kinds of digital documentation such as augmented and virtual reality environments.

The limitations presented by the terms "information" and "record" can be reconciled by situating them within the materialist lens of "documentation." This term brings together "information" and "record" by emphasizing their material foundations and associated practices, and also expands the focus to the diversity

of objects, beyond institutional settings, that instantiate information into tangible items that can be used in different ways in various contexts. Michael Buckland employs the concept of "information-as-thing"[xii] to help further describe documents and to clarify their close relationship to information. "Information-as-thing" denotes bits, bytes, books, and other physical media and technologies, including any material object or action perceived as signifying something. An "information-as-thing" is, in other words, a document since it is a material object that presents evidence of something A document makes information tangible in order to be practiced with and used. It is documents, or "information-as-things," that we are dealing with in our lives, workplaces, and societies.

Yet, as aforementioned, the term "information" is often favored over "documentation" (and even "record"). Favoring the term information divorces it from materiality, that is, the material forms and formats in which it is instantiated, and instead considers it as immaterial phenomena. Bernd Frohmann criticizes overlooking information's materiality, arguing that "to imagine the information conveyed by a member of the rapidly expanding universe of documents as abstract, noble, document content indifferent to the transformation of its vehicles and stripped of all material, institutional, and social supports is to imagine it as belonging to the same ontological category as the immaterial, intentional, and mental substance present to an individual mind in a state of understanding that document."[xiii] Information, in other words, does not exist in some idealized "state of knowing" but instead needs material objects in which to communicate, display, represent, or use it.

Viewing or considering information as immaterial is further exacerbated by the increasing ubiquity of digital devices and technologies that tend to promote "a widespread perception of the immateriality of the digital domain and the related assumption that it was somehow enabling us to transcend matter."[xiv]

Digital information is often regarded as being "ephemeral," without material or physical constraints, somehow simply existing or floating around in the virtual ether of the "clouds" (another ephemeral phenomena). Put differently, it is as though being or going digital means eschewing the physical world, and that digital information, by extension, somehow simply exists in virtual space as some ephemeral entity appearing, hovering, and disappearing on screens. But the digital world and its digital information are very material; they depend upon complex physical items and infrastructures for their existence, operations, and uses.[xv]

As a result of this perception, there is even less consideration given to, and more confusion about, the documentary forms and formats that make this digital information possible. As Buckland notes, "a paper document is distinguished, in part, by the fact that it is on paper. But that aspect, the technological medium, is less helpful with digital documents. An e-mail message and a technical report exist physically in a digital environment as a string of bits, but so does everything else in a physical environment."[xvi] A digital document – whether wiki or e-book, file or database, website or podcast, virtual reality environment or social media profile – is a discrete unit of bits requiring a surrounding and supporting infrastructural assemblage of hardware and software infrastructures and associated devices, platforms, and operating systems. This discrete unit of bits, moreover, cannot be separated from this surrounding and supporting assemblage upon which it depends.

This complex material assemblage raises questions of what exactly are digital documents? As Lund observes, "when you can no longer hold a document in your hand, but only see it on the computer screen... [the] crucial quality of a document being a finite/discrete entity in a material sense is dissolved into a number of bits organized for a short period of time with the permanent risk of crash and

disappearance."[xvii] Are digital documents only the discrete units of bits and bytes and their codes, or must their surrounding and supporting assemblage be taken into account? Where do digital documents begin and end, especially since there are no clear boundaries as everything in virtual space exists as bits and bytes? Are digital documents fixed or fluid?

Roswitha Skare and Niels W. Lund, for example, question whether Facebook is a digital document.[xviii] They ask if Facebook is a document with or without borders – and if it has borders, what or where are they; if it does not have borders, where does it begin and end – and if it is a book as it claims to be in its name. They argue that Facebook represents a new kind of document, a worldwide document, that is a complex, dynamic document on its own but that also creates, embeds, facilitates, supports, shares, and extends a diverse range of other kinds of digital documents. It offers more than a conventional book or e-book and yet has similarities and differences with more established print and physical documents. It "has similarities with many classical documentation forms like literary books, telephone directories, annual [a]cademic [f]ace books, newspapers etc. and at the same time it is something completely new challenging hitherto used analytical conceptual tools."[xix] One feature that makes Facebook a unique kind of (digital) document is its complex plethora of documents that make up or are a part of it – such as pictures, videos, articles, stories, reports, e-books, blogs, links to other websites, interactive chat and video services, integration with other social media sites like Instagram, and so on – that give it multiple borders and simultaneously render it borderless.

New and emerging digital technologies additionally complicate considerations of digital information because they are often accompanied by the need for new kinds of digital documentation. Lyn Robinson explains that these new kinds of digital documents – from interactive, multimedia, multiplatform texts to virtual

reality environments – require new kinds of practices.[xx] These new digital documents arise "from a combination of rapidly developing technologies, particularly pervasive, networked information and multi-sensory interaction, when combined with participatory texts."[xxi] Three technological trends are creating new kinds of digital documents: first, mobile becoming pervasive; second, multi-media becoming multi-sensory; and third, interactive becoming participative. These three trends are further deepening our dependence upon and immersion in documentation. Robinson explains that "the feeling of being enveloped in information which is provided by a pervasive information environment, involving multi-sensory input, delivering a participative text, provides what may reasonably be described an immersive experience. The record of such experiences is an immersive document. Both the 'raw' text, and each experience of it, may be considered as a document, posing interesting issues for the organization and management of such documents."[xxii] Information governance is directly impacted by these developments since it must increasingly deal with digital documentation, including these new kinds, in professional settings and practices.

A documentary approach can be applied to objects and information to help illuminate their documentary features and status as documents. Such an approach provides pathways for exploring different aspects of objects – including their material forms, associated practices, and contexts in which they appear and are used – to determine their roles as documentation. Such an approach is important for information governance because the profession, even with its apparent favoring of "information," is deeply engaged with documentation. Let us now turn to one possible documentary approach to objects and information.

A Documentary Approach

Although ostensibly concerned with information, the information governance field deals with documentation at its most fundamental level. It would arguably be impracticable, and even unthinkable, without documentation. Organizing and managing a database, for example, involves the selection, organization, and management of documents. A database itself is a kind of document that incorporates, arranges, and stores other documents.[xxiii] Retrieving information from a database means engaging in a documentary practice. One is, after all, seeking a specific document in order to acquire the information they desire or need. The database does not display the information that is sought; instead, the database offers the document in which the information is instantiated and thus where it is featured and located.

A documentary approach helps draw attention to the documentation at the center of the profession. According to Buckland, there are four interrelated components of a documentary approach, namely: 1) human agency; 2) materials and technologies; 3) techniques and practices; and 4) effects, purposes, and outcomes.[xxiv]

The first aspect, regarding human agency, examines the creators of documents. Documents often "are social productions, not the work of individuals. A wide variety of people are involved in differing ways."[xxv] Documents further "have a series of lives, with different players involved in differing ways at successive stages."[xxvi] Different kinds of actors, both human and nonhuman, are involved in creating or generating documents in diverse ways at various points.

Documents can therefore be seen as having their own particular kinds of careers and associated histories. Don Brenneis, for instance, describes how documents have careers and histories. Documents "are embedded in multiple histories

[at every institutional level]."[xxvii] Put differently, documents can have various, but interrelated, historical narratives in different settings and at different stages of their so-called lifespan and usage. These multiple histories, otherwise referred to as the record continuum or lifecycle in more practical records and information management contexts, affect and shape the forms, formats, structure, and use of these documents.

These histories, moreover, are intimately connected with particular careers. Brenneis states that "in order to understand these changes it is crucial to locate the forms in the specific annual administrative processes within which they figure, that is, to follow their 'careers' – the doings with documents in which they are routinely involved – and to trace the subsequent events in which they take particular kinds of evaluative life."[xxviii] Richard Harper similarly observes how documents have a series of lives with different players involved in different ways at successive stages of their so-called careers.[xxix] These doings with documents are the practices associated with and afforded by documents at different stages of their histories. Documents, in other words, display and demand different affordances, purposes, and objectives depending upon the context in which they are deployed.

The second and third aspects of a documentary methodology examine the materials and technologies and the techniques and practices, respectively, involved in documentation. The materials involved and used shape the object and, in turn, determine the practices afforded by and with it; in other words, different materials demand different practices. Material differences are especially evident when documents are dissimilar in forms, formats, and functions. A digital tablet, for example, involves different materials and affords different practices

than a clay tablet. On the one hand, a digital tablet depends upon electrical and telecommunications infrastructures and further "requires practices such as tapping, typing, and scrolling in addition to downloading, uploading, picture taking, audiovisual recording, and the use of diverse apps that themselves require different practices."[xxx] On the other hand, a clay tablet depends upon soil and water and "requires practices such as molding, inscribing, and reading."[xxxi] Although there are similar practices enabled by both kinds of documents, such as reading or viewing textual or visual information, their material differences, and consequently affordances, starkly contrast with each other.

The fourth aspect examines documentation's effects. One major effect of documentation is information. Frohmann argues "attention to [documents and] practices with documents reveals how it is that particular documents, at particular times and places and in particular areas of the social and cultural terrain, become informative."[xxxii] Examining the materiality of documents and what practices are engaged with them helps better reveal their surrounding contexts – whether in an office or a society – and how it is that they are or become informing. An effect of documentation, in other words, is instantiating and making possible the objects of information, and practices with them including organizing, managing, and preserving, that are central to information governance.

Conclusion: Dealing with Documents

Documentation helps reorient our focus back to information's materiality. A documentary perspective or lens permits different opportunities to approach and analyze objects, information, and other "things" deemed as constituting evidence. A documentary perspective or lens therefore helps us better understand how "a document allows for the materialization of information, helping transform it from

something that is intangible into something that is tangible that, in turn, can be used by many different actors for various purposes in diverse settings."[xxxiii] Information is in many respects dependent upon its materiality – that is, its documentation – for its existence; in fact, it can be argued that information is, after all, an effect of documentation. Information governance is therefore necessarily concerned with documentation generally and the governance of documents and practices with them specifically.

The term "documentation," moreover, permits more diverse considerations of and reflections on diverse objects as documents and information beyond those items that are conventionally regarded as "records." In this sense, "documentation" expands understandings of information and helps broaden information governance concerns and practices to cover all kinds of items that serve as evidence of something. This broadening of the field is important because it takes into account and also goes beyond conventional institutional documents – including records like files, memos, letters, applications, policies, procedures, and databases – to other kinds of objects, and increasingly new kinds of digital and hybrid physical-digital objects, that organizations encounter and need. Like modern society and contemporary institutions, documentation is indeed the emblem of information governance.

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[iii] Riles, Documents, p. 5.

[iv] Freeman and Maybin, "Documents, Practices and Policy," p. 155.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] See for example: Levy, Scrolling Forward, 2016.

[vii] See for example: Frohmann, Deflating Information, 2004a; and Bernd Frohmann, "Documentation Redux: Prolegomenon to (Another) Philosophy of Information," Library Trends 52, no. 3 (2004b): 387-407.

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[ix] Kosciejew, "A Material-Documentary Literacy," p. 98.

[x]Marc Kosciejew, "Documentation and the Information of Art," Tate Papers 29, Spring 2008, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/29/documentation-and-the-information-of-art (accessed on August 28, 2019).

[xi] For instances of other conversations about these concepts, specifically within the ARMA community, see for example: Nick Inglis, "A Pair of Foundational Concepts," Information Management (2019): https://magazine.arma.org/2019/06/a-pair-of-foundational-concepts/ (accessed on August 28, 2019); and Marc Kosciejew, "A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Information", Information Management 51, no. 5 (2017): 40-42, http://imm.arma.org/publication/index.php?i=437827&m=0&l=&p=44&pre=#{"page":42,"issue_id":437827} (accessed on August 28, 2019).

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[xiii] Frohmann, "Documentation Redux," pp. 389-390.

[xiv] Marlene Manoff, "Unintended Consequences: New Materialist Perspectives on Library Technologies and the Digital Record," Libraries and the Academy, 13, no. 3 (2013): p. 276.

[xv] See for example: Andrew Blum, Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet (New York City: Ecco, 2012).

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[xix] Skare and Lund, "Facebook – a Document Without Borders?," p. 3.

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[xxi] Robinson, "Immersive information behaviour," p. 112.

[xxii] Robinson, "Immersive information behaviour," p. 113.

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[xxiv] Buckland, "Northern Light," 2007.

[xxv] Ibid., p. 330.

[xxvi] Ibid., p. 330.

[xxvii] Don Brenneis, "Reforming Promise," Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge, ed. by Annelise Riles, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006, p. 58.

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[xxxi] Ibid, p. 39.

[xxxii] Frohmann, "Documentation Redux," p. 405.

[xxxiii] Kosciejew, "A Material-Documentary Literacy," pp. 98-99.