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# A Discussion on Document Conceptualization

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## 1. The Mental Dimension: A Phenomenological Approach to Documents

**NWL:** In a very interesting article in *Journal of Documentation*, Tim Gorichanaz and K. F. Latham (2016) present a model for a holistic analysis of documents. I will start with their discussion of Michael Buckland's criticism of work in document theory for a lack of attention to the mental dimension. They say:

Thus far, the literature in document theory has focused on the physical and social aspects of documents and *lacks deep consideration of the active role of the human involved* (Buckland, 2015). Document studies is in *need of a coherent body of literature that examines "the individual's mental relationship with documents"* (Buckland, 2015, preprint p. 8). Latham (2012, 2014) also notes the missing individual in document studies and presented a route to bridge the gap through phenomenology. (Gorichanaz & Latham, 2016, p. 1115, emphasis mine)

To address the mental dimension, they present a model based in phenomenology, but it's unclear how such an approach can be "holistic" as they imply.

**KFL:** Our initial foray into using phenomenology as a point of departure came after several claims from the document community that there is a lack of "deep consideration of the active role of the human involved" (Gorichanaz & Latham, 2016, p. 1115), especially from Buckland (2014, 2015) and myself (Latham 2012, 2014). Phenomenology seeks understanding through the lifeworld, and the lifeworld is holistic—in other words, it involves all aspects of the world as lived. This means that none of the aspects of a document or document experience are left out or weighed more heavily than any other. What Lund (2004, 2009) calls the social, mental and material are all there.

Methodologically, phenomenology allowed us to suggest tools for analysis by which to expand on Lund's (2009) and Skare's (2009) previous work. Phenomenology's concerns with parts, wholes, and moments (Sokolowski, 2000) is another reason we felt that, methodologically, it could be very useful, as we wanted to include both analysis and synthesis.

**NWL:** You say "world as lived." What about what's *not* lived? Shouldn't that be taken into account, too, for an account to be truly holistic? Otherwise aren't you just limited to a person's mental content? Like many humanities approaches, phenomenology seems to value doing things with the head, and forgetting about the hands.

**TG:** It's a common misconception that phenomenology is purely mental, that it focuses on meanings alone. It takes lived meaning as the point of departure, but its true strength is in exposing the tension between meanings and what

causes the meanings—that is, external reality. It really wants to get to the causes, but it recognizes that this may be impossible. Still, through concepts such as intersubjectivity—recognizing that different individuals can share aspects of their experiences—it can make some ground. There’s also a strand of phenomenology called radical phenomenology, or nonintentional phenomenology, and this purports to account for phenomena in reality so as to be independent of human observers (see Henry, 2009).

**NWL:** Even so, the basis in phenomenology still gives priority to meaning—to the mental dimension—and that is a serious problem for me! In my view, the mental dimension must be weighted the same as the social and physical dimensions. You cannot have a document without having all three equally-weighted dimensions in place.

**KFL:** But our model *does* address all three, and we do not claim that any of the three has higher priority than the others. We don’t believe that phenomenology inherently privileges the mental dimension.

## 2. What is a Document?

**NWL:** Let’s discuss the model you present for what you call “documental becoming” (Figure 1). You say, “Because perception is the action through which documents are ascertained, the senses play a central role in documental becoming. ... Buckland (1997) described documents as being made from the human processing of objects” (Gorichanaz & Latham, 2016, p. 1119). But all this does is account for the mental process of perceiving a given object.

I believe it is very problematic to make the status of a document only a matter of perception, and not of conception or production of an “object.” How is it possible to talk about a holistic analysis of documents, when you leave out the physical and social processes and only focus on the mental processes?

In 1967, the French literary scholar Roland Barthes published an essay on “The Death of the Author” (Barthes, 1977) in which he claimed that the relationship between the author and his biography does not have relevance for a reader in understanding the text; rather, it is the reader who creates the text. Your argument would seem to suit Barthes very well. I’ll ask you, therefore: Is not the producer of the document relevant in the perception of the document?

I will claim that the author does have some relevance for the perception of the document. Not his biography, necessarily, but his social setting, choice of media and way of using media. That does not mean the author means everything. The reader also means definitively much. It is a matter of exchange, although the reader very seldom has the opportunity to directly respond to the author.

**KFL:** Whether the producer of the document is involved is up to the person doing the document analysis. Sometimes the physical producer will be

important, but not always. The point of the framework is to provide a flexible structure for an interested person to apply it in a way that suits them. At this point, there is nothing you cannot do with it. In documental becoming (Act One), one can ask questions about how the document came to be as it is now, i.e. how it was made, who made it, where it came from, etc.

**NWL:** In my view, if the document is understood as a product, then the process of production needs to be investigated. Your model of documental becoming talks about the perception of the object, but not its physical creation.

**KFL:** It can be either. I would say that if one chooses to explore the creation of the initial document, then the document transaction is between the maker and the thing itself (song, video, painting, etc.). We purposefully did not say at what point in the life of the object (or person) that the becoming occurs—that must be defined by the researcher.

### 3. The Process of Documentation

**NWL:** So, is documentation something different from documental becoming? Your model distinguishes the material object, the creation of the object (documentation) and the perception of the object (documental becoming). This seems to leave the vast majority of documentation outside of documental becoming—not to mention document status. Shouldn't documental becoming, if we need the concept at all, be part of documentation?

**TG:** As I understand it, documentation is the process of creating a physical object (keeping in mind that sound waves and electromagnetic impulses are physical). As you articulated (Lund, 2004), this process entails a human producer, a set of instruments for producing, a mode of using these instruments and the resulting document; and this process is constrained and enabled by any number of factors, from socioeconomic pressures to individual whims. Some of these factors are “baked into” the finished document, while others can only be discovered by looking at the documentation process—and certainly there are shades of gradation in between.

For instance, consider a carved wooden stump, with a slightly concave and polished top, positioned on a floor, as a document being seen for the first time in hundreds of years or more. Virtually any human (or cat) who sees this will see it as a place to sit. Assuming it was indeed made as a seat, this is an example of a baked-in factor. Some people—experts—may be able to tell whether the maker used stone or iron tools; this evidence is baked-in, but it is not readily apprehensible to everyone. But virtually nobody would be able to say what forest the wood came from, why this tree was chosen or whether the stool was originally a gift.

This begins to illustrate the notion of documental becoming. Of course, the document *becomes* for the producer as the result of the documentation

process, but it also *becomes* for countless beholders later on. For any given beholder, the wooden stump will have any number of associations that may or may not have anything to do with the documentation process. Maybe the wooden stump reminds me of a lakeside lodge in northern Wisconsin, as well as the videogame *Super Mario World*. At first blush, the first association makes sense, the second less so. (But if I told you I spent some of my summers in such a lodge playing Super Nintendo, then it might make more sense.)

I'd suggest that the intrinsic aspect of a document—its material structure and baked-in object knowledge—goes a long way in constituting a document's meaning. This is why many people can encounter a given document and often get more or less the same meaning out of it. But it will never be exactly the same—much less the case across cultures and in the case of numinous experiences. That's why we felt compelled to formally recognize the extrinsic, abtrinsic and adtrinsic information that go into all instances of documental becoming.

To put it succinctly: Documentation is one kind of documental becoming, wherein the document's intrinsic information is modified.

**KFL:** I see it a bit differently. For me, if a museum visitor walks through an exhibit and encounters an object, the transaction could be considered a type of documentation.

**NWL:** That is the case for me, too. And you need to consider the process more fully in all examples. The major problem is that you put too much focus on the object *as it is*. You actually risk objectifying the whole process. Your model lacks recognition of the medium and the mode that interface between the person and the object in the process of documentation. How can you deal with medium and mode in your model?

**TG:** This is a well-placed question, one that we did not directly consider in our model. This is because, as I say above, I view documental becoming as a process of which documentation is one specific kind. A peculiarity of our model is that it does not represent time very well; rather, we sought to represent specific moments of document transaction.

This becomes a limitation when it comes to medium and mode, as these concepts denote processes that unfold in time. In the parlance of our model, the extension of medium and mode falls under intrinsic (and, to some extent extrinsic) information. As I see it, every meaning leads to a new meaning. That is, the four informations cohere into a meaning that is then carried forth in the situation as the four informations come together anew, *ad infinitum*. In a given case of documental becoming, perhaps the four informations don't change very much. But in a situation of emotional tumult, for instance, perhaps the abtrinsic information changes rapidly. Likewise, during a case of documentation, the intrinsic information is likely changing

rapidly. It is the nature of the changes in intrinsic information across time that constitutes the concepts of medium and mode. Yes, that is such a complicated explanation as to verge on the absurd; for those who value parsimony, perhaps we ought to find a better way to represent the time dimension in our framework.

**KFL:** We did mention temporality in the framework but we weren't exactly sure how to structure it into an analysis, so in the end we left that to the researcher. I encountered this problem in my use of the framework in my DOCAM '16 paper (see Latham, 2016, in this volume). My analysis was centered on a moment of realization about Irish peat bogs, but my realization involved many years of memories and understandings leading up to that moment, as well as changes in those understandings after the moment. I wasn't sure how to factor all of that in to the scenario. So, right there, we have an example of applying the framework and learning what we need to do to refine it. *But*, here's what using the Framework *did* do for me: Applying it, I was able to figure out what changed and what didn't in the document transaction (since I was trying to sort out "floating fixity") in a holistic but clinical way. I feel that the exercise was extremely successful and I went from hazy to clear on what happened in the Irish peat bog moment.

**NWL:** But it's still not the whole picture. Think about *The Scream*, Edvard Munch's famous painting. There's not just one *The Scream*, though. In fact, Munch created five versions of the image using different techniques and tools—painting, lithography and pastels. Between the artist and the museum guest, you have the curator choosing one of the versions (voluntarily or depending on which one the museum has) and placing it in the certain way in a gallery. From this, the museum guest creates their document that we could call "Munch's *The Scream*." And then consider how, when the image turned 100 in 1993 and entered the public domain, copies and remediations of *The Scream* were created in all sorts of formats and media. Now there are countless producers of *The Scream*. All this shows how the different people and institutions play a role in the documentation process as a whole.

**KFL:** What you say is true, and I agree that there can be (and often is) a "catchment area" of versions of a document that are all equally involved (see Latour and Lowe, 2010, for this concept). At the same time, a person doesn't need to know the whole history of an image to have a valid experience with a painting. We sought to provide a way to account for those individual experiences, which may not be "true" from a socio-historical perspective, *as well as* those broader social and historical perspectives. We've already discussed individual experiences, but let me outline how our model could be used to draw up a broader account.

Act Two of our framework, which we called "documental being," could be used to investigate the original creation and creator of a document

through any of the three frames (parts of documents, individual documents and document systems). In documental being, one can ask questions about documentation, especially in Frame 3 (document systems). Again, we left the definition of this broad so that researchers could have flexibility to insert their own approach. One could take an approach to documentation—let’s say the act of cataloging a museum object—in the context of document systems. We did not insert judgment or weight into any of these levels because we wanted the researcher to decide. If I decided to look at the social aspect of cataloging museum objects, for instance, I could decide that is my approach, state the conceptual framework behind it, then proceed to do an analysis on the situation using any of the three frames to help answer my questions. Again, this is a tool to help document research, not a judgment call.

**NWL:** Think about this. Edvard Munch documented his capacity as artist by making his art. The curator is documenting his capacity as curator by putting together an exhibition of Munch and making Munch’s painting a museum document. The spectator is documenting her capacity as spectator by creating a third document through her physical senses as well as her cognitive senses. In this way we have three different documents, produced at three different times, which share a lot of things. You can talk about a complex of documents, all almost being the same, but not completely. How can your model deal with that?

**TG:** For us, they’re three different documents, so they must be dealt with one at a time. By going through the analysis, we’ll find that the intrinsic information—the physical stuff of the painting—is the thread that holds the three together. But really, I’d suggest these three document experiences are going to be much more different than you imply! In any case, your point about needing to better represent medium and mode, and in a more active way, is well taken.

**KFL:** I slightly disagree with Tim on this one. I think that our framework allows you to recognize this “complex” of documents—absolutely—what it does is give you the terminology to sort it all out and see what is going on. This is precisely what it did for me in the Irish peat bog example. Document experiences (processes, perception, physicality, all of it) are complex and to separate them out unnaturally continues the problem that got us to the point of writing this article. I would say we have privileged certain aspects of that experience, and need to equally consider all possibilities. The fact that the same document (the painting) is “documented” differently by curator and visitor is a fact that should always be considered but has not typically. Again, the researcher’s initial questions and interests are paramount here. What is the researcher trying to find out?

#### 4. Complementarity

**NWL:** I also think we need to discuss the issue of complementarity. As I wrote in my paper from the SCARLID conference in Oulu (Lund, 2004), I believe documentation is a complementary process and cannot only be considered as a physical process, nor as social process or a mental process, but rather it must be considered a matter of all three complementary processes. For me, there's value in keeping them separate. Only by analyzing the processes individually can you do them justice and really expose the tensions between them. To study them well, they require different approaches.

**TG:** I see what you mean, and I agree with you to a point. I follow the work of Roger Scruton (2014) who presents a view of cognitive dualism. Scruton argues that the empirical, objective world of science is incommensurate with the subjective world of consciousness. You can either see pixels and hear sounds, or you can see images and hear music—not both. But from a distance, you can consider both sides of the coin and explore how they intersect, as Skare (2009) did. It's engaging with the Hard Problem, essentially—wondering about how consciousness arises from a mass of gray matter.

**KFL:** I see what Niels is saying, and I recognize that this works for certain applications, but I see it differently. I believe that separating out social, material, and mental creates a false situation. A person does not exist in the world “only socially,” for instance; while they are “being social,” they are also in a material world and “mentally” processing the world. This is where phenomenology comes in to play for me. Trying to parse out these always-all-at-once aspects of the world into distinct parts does not represent actual situations.

**NWL:** On the contrary, I insist on a-synthesis. I believe that trying to synthesize, you lose the details that matter. For instance, I believe we are having a conceptual problem with using the word “documentation” for so many things. It's creating confusion. It might be better to keep them separate:

- Documentation – physical dimension
- Communication – social dimension
- Information – mental dimension

At the same time, we might use documentation as an overarching concept for all three processes running simultaneously both for the producer and the user. Perhaps we should abandon the notion of “user” and recognize both the author and the reader as producers.

**KFL:** We approached it differently in our model and we believe that analysis and synthesis should both be used in tandem. Let's look again at Act One to show the back and forth use of analysis and synthesis. The four informations are analytical tools meant to “take apart” a document experience. Once the

whole is looked at in each of these four ways, we bring them back together to address the document experience. We recognize that the boundaries between the four informations we describe are diffuse in many cases (see Gorichanaz & Latham, 2016, pp. 1121–1122). If we made (or claimed) them to be concrete, we would be doing a disservice to scholarship around documents. The four informations are a start, a suggestion. We need everyone to play around with these, apply them, and tell us what works and what does not, what is missing and what is just plain wrong. A strength is that this approach attempts to emulate reality: nothing is concrete, and fluidity occurs. The very fuzziness is a strength. A weakness is that this fuzziness might make it difficult to follow. Since we would like to put this framework to work and get feedback, we hope that over time we can refine and adjust it.

It's also worth mentioning that, in writing the portion about the four informations, Tim and I had a lot of back and forth and some disagreement, especially in terminology. Finally, we had to just settle on something so we could move forward, publish, and get feedback. I, for instance, do not like the word "information." But really, when you are juggling words like "object," "document," and "information," things get really sticky really fast. We had to "just do it," as the famous shoe people say.

**TG:** I'd also add that I see our framework as more of a rough guide than a clearly defined roadmap. I'd contend that all documents involve all four informations, but I'm sure different people would put the same information in different buckets. The point isn't to lock you into a rigid model; rather, it's to give you some suggestions as to where to start looking.

**KFL:** As I see it, Niels, your 100% social, mental, and material are all there, all the time in our model. But I do see now the ramifications of our different ways of dealing with this. In the end, I suspect you will insist on a-synthesis just as fervently we as insist on synthesis.

**NWL:** Yes, Kiersten, I will insist on the a-synthesis. I better understand your approach now, although I'm still not convinced why documental becoming is a better overarching concept than documentation. I think that the time and space dimensions are very important to work on in detail, to get at the very process of documentation (or documental becoming)—so, there's lots to discuss in our future works.

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