# The neo-documentalist movement, where does it stand after 27 years 1996-2023

# 1.1 Does a name make a difference?

In September 1996, I met Michael Buckland for the first time in a coffee break together with Boyd Rayward. It was at the International COLIS II conference in Copenhagen at the Royal School of Librarianship. I had just started as professor in documentation studies at the University of Tromsø in Norway and earlier that summer, I was criticized by my Nordic colleagues for naming our program as documentation studies instead of the most used name, Library and Information Studies. My colleagues told me it was old-fashioned and out of date. So, it was very relieving when two of the grand old men in the field, both former deans of LIS Schools and specialists in the history of the field, told me that I was certainly on the right track and was having the history with me and that we all together formed and represented the neo-documentalist movement. That's how the neo-documentalist movement was founded in a coffee-break in 1996. (Lund and Buckland, 2008) It is also an anecdote in the more general discussion of how to conceive the academic field of librarianship.

In the article "Documents, Memory Institutions and Information Science" in 2000, the Danish professor Birger Hjørland discussed exactly this labelling issue. After having mentioned that the American Documentation Institute in 1968 changed its name into the American Society for Information Science (ASIS), he says:

... in recent years extremely few institutions have chosen the term 'documentation' as part of their name. One notable exception is in Tromsø, Norway, where 'Documentation Science' has been chosen as the name for a newly founded institute. Two Scandinavian LIS Schools, the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Copenhagen and the Institute of Documentation Science at the University of Tromsø, have thus chosen different names. What theoretical influences lie behind these choices? How do such different conceptions affect the content of the activities that are carried on? (Hjørland, 2000, 28)

After a critical discussion primarily on the conceptions of information retrieval versus document retrieval in Anglophone literature, Hjørland concludes:

The problem that I have raised in this article is whether we should prefer the term 'documentation science' (as recently introduced in Tromsø) or 'information science' (as recently introduced in Copenhagen). I have tried to argue that the conceptions of information, information retrieval and information science are seriously flawed, and that the problems in IS are not just terminological but rooted in problematic theoretical assumptions. This blocking in our field can to a large degree be avoided by changing the object of study from mental phenomena of ideas, facts, and opinion, to social phenomena of communication, documents, and memory institutions. This is a strong argument for choosing the expression 'documentation science'. ... The article could stop here. Tromsø won. However, the terms LIS and IS are rather well

established, and they can in my opinion be justified if we make it clear that we are studying potentially informative objects. (Hjørland, 2000, 39)

The Nordic library and information science world has for many years been in close collaboration, organized conferences, and projects in collaboration, but they have also been in close collaboration with their British and American colleagues, illustrated by the COLIS conferences, the Nordic-British LIS conferences and the shared anglophone publication channels. In contrast there has been very little collaboration between Nordic LIS-scholars and colleagues in Germany and especially colleagues in the Latin world, France, Italy, Spain etc. The conceptual framework, research questions, methods were shared across the Atlantic. It has been focused on two topics, first *information seeking*, *information retrieval*, how do people behave when they seek information and how can these processes be improved and secondly on the *library as a social and cultural institution* (Ibekwe, 2019). There have been different approaches to these topics, different paradigms (Hartel, 2019), but the focus has been the same.

This may well explain why Tromsø is still alone in the Nordic countries when it comes to the documentation name, but it does not explain why the documentation concept was chosen and what the "solid historical roots" for the name for the new program were.

In 1989 a committee in Tromsø, consisting of librarians and faculty members from Northern Norway, suggested establishing a study program in Northern Norway to solve two problems:

- lack of educated librarians in Northern Norway
- the consequences of the new act of legal deposit in Norway in 1989

The first problem could be solved by making a new program in librarianship with the familiar academic name for such a program, Library and Information Science, but the second problem was a different matter.

The new act of legal deposit demanded delivery to the National Library in Norway of all publications in any medium, not only in print, but online, cd, DVD, CD-ROMs, floppy discs etc. This new policy for the national library also defined the policy for public libraries in general. The new librarians had to deal with not only the content, the information, but also with a diversity of physical formats, in other words to deal with many kinds of documents, the potentially informative objects as Hjørland formulated it. Therefore, the committee suggested the concept of documentation in the name of the program. The choice of name was a pure pragmatic decision by to deal with a new challenge in the Norwegian libraries, unaware of the fact that the name was considered old-fashioned by the Nordic LIS-community as well of the fact that there was solid historical background for choosing the name. The unawareness of the historical roots for documentation studies in the Nordic countries may be related to lack of contact with especially the francophone LIS world, but also to have little interest in the history of the field.

As the name of the most prominent journal in the field, Journal of Documentation as well as the previous name of the American LIS institution, American Documentation Institute indicate, the concept of documentation has been central earlier in history. If one goes back

to the first international organizations of libraries at the turn of the 20th century, there was close collaboration across many linguistic borders and continents, not least across the francophone and the Anglo-American world in making The International Organization of Bibliography and Documentation, FID. This work was led by the two Belgian lawyers Henri La Fontaine and Paul Otlet, the latter author of Traité de Documentation in 1934 (Otlet, 1934) and the founder of modern information science, which he called documentation. Otlet and his work has been the object for a life-long study by Boyd Rayward, resulting in many publications, biographies, translated editions of Otlet's text, studies of other pioneers in the organization of knowledge etc. (Rayward, 1975, 1992, 1994, 1997, 2008) Paul Otlet was very interested in organizing any kinds of documents, not only books, but also maps, photographs and other informative objects. Otlet and Fontaine envisioned creating a kind of complete documentation museum, Mundaneum. While Otlet was dedicated to the organization of the documents and to new forms of documents in the beginning of the 20th century, the French documentalist Suzanne Briet was in the 1950es devoted to defining the craft of documentation and how to define what is documentation and what is a document in her manifest "Qu'est-ce que la documentation?" in 1951. After being forgotten for many years, thanks to Michael Buckland's work, Briet's work became re-discovered in the 1990es and known not only in the Anglo-American world, but also in her own native Francophone world (Ibekwe, 2019, p. 19). Briet's example with an antelope as a document, became a key point in Buckland's article "What is a document" from 1997 (Buckland, 1997) and Briet's manifest was translated and edited in an English version in 2006 (Briet, 2006). This is the background for Rayward's and Buckland's claim in the coffeebreak that we had the history with us when we were starting our new program in documentation studies in 1996 and was part of a neo-documentalist movement. 27 years later, one may ask if the choice of name made a difference?

# 1.2 Documentation studies in Tromsø, The Document Academy and DOCAM

In the beginning of the program in documentation studies in Tromsø, several scholars visited the department. In the fall of 1999, Boyd Rayward came to Tromsø and lectured about Paul Otlet and H.G. Wells World brain, about two of the visionary documentalists previewing and to some extent predicting the emerging World Wide Web. At the same time, in October 1999, the Finnish scholar, Vesa Suominen from University of Oulu in Finland, came to Tromsø lecturing about how to talk about documents, suggesting that one should talk about "document retrieval" instead of "information retrieval" (Suominen, 1997). Jay David Bolter, professor in new media at Georgia Institute of Technology, came as well to Tromsø, talking about hypertexts and new media. Different guests, different perspectives, but together they initiated an international conversation and investigation around pioneers in documentation, how to talk about documents and the future of documents.

Bolter recommended to visit the research center at the Document Company, Xerox PARC, Palo Alto Research Centre, in California. I got in touch with Maribeth Back, sound designer and member of the RED group, Research in Experimental Documents/Design at Xerox PARC, directed by Rich Gold. In December 1999, I went to California and visited the RED group at PARC and got an insight in their experiments on designing future reading devices and their upcoming exhibition XFR, experiments For Reading, with experimental devices

with many of the now common capacities on mobile phones and tablets, but in 1999 futuristic options. (Back, 2012)

On the same occasion, I also went to UC-Berkeley and met Michael Buckland again for a lunch at the Faculty Club at UC-Berkeley. This time, we discussed not so much definitions, but more the diversity of documents and brainstormed how many kinds of documents we could come up with. We talked about documents in all parts of society, diaries, lawbooks, holy texts, paintings, passports etc. This led to talk about closer collaboration and the idea of making a course at SIMS at Berkeley, School of Information Management and Systems. In 2001 I went to UC-Berkeley as visiting professor and ran the seminar entitled "Documents in society" together with Buckland. That discussion continued when Buckland, Rayward and I later the same year, in December 2001, participated in *The Nordic*-Internationally Colloquium on Social and Cultural Awareness and responsibility in Library, Information and Documentation Studies (SCARLID), (Aware and Responsible, 2004) organized by our Finnish colleague Vesa Suominen . One of the conclusions of the SCARLID colloquium was that we all agree on the importance of a multi-dimensional approach to the documentation field and on keeping an open-ended discussion of the core issues. This coincides with the founding of The Document Academy, a forum for documentation students, scholars, and artists around the world, by Maribeth Back and me in San Francisco earlier in 2001. In the first run it was a homepage, but Buckland and I developed the idea of having an annual meeting of the Document Academy, the DOCAM meeting, and had the first meeting at Berkeley in 2003. This has evolved into an annual, international event which takes place in different places around the world and keeps the documentation field alive. One may call it the home of the neo-documentalist movement.

The number of participants in the annual meetings has been stable at around 50 people over the 20 years, coming from many parts of the world and many of them being regular participants. Among the North American participants, several have had an explicitly critical approach to the dominant information paradigm in the LIS-world like Bernd Frohmann, author of Deflating information: From science studies to documentation (2004). If we look for Nordic and British participants, very few apart from the Tromsø-group have participated. Notable exceptions from this are the Swedish people from Gothenburg University and Växjö University, the latter being host for the DOCAM meeting twice, in 2011 and 2021. In 2015, the meeting was in Sydney in Australia and there is a strong documentation group in New South Wales. DOCAM has also been held in Italy, but I will end this overview of the participants in the annual meetings of the Document Academy, the international neo-documentalist environment, by looking into 3 places around the world where there has been a revival of interest for documentation in recent years.

### 1.3 The French neo-documentalist movement: document numerique.

While Rayward and Buckland talked about the past, about francophone pioneers like Paul Otlet, Suzanne Briet and Robert Pagés, a new documentalist movement emerged in France, focusing on the newest form of documents, the digital documents. It was especially done in a so-called "Reseau thématique pluridisciplinaire" group within the French National Research Council, CNRS. They published their work collectively under the name R.T. Pedauque (Pedauque, 2006). They approached the digital document from three angles: the document as form, the document as sign and the document as medium or, as the organizer

of the group, Jean Michel Salaun formulated, "vu, lu et su" (Salaun, 2012). In this way, it was possible to describe what was new with the digital documents and what was like the known analogue documents. Several of the RTP-group members explored and presented different kinds of digital documents. Manuel Zacklad presented the concept of "Document for action" to describe a special kind of documents used in the new form of collaboration supported by the computer, the CSCW, Computer Supported Collaborative Work (Zacklad, 2006) and Evelyne Broudoux worked on how new documentation forms challenge the concept of authority on the diversity of digital platforms (Broudoux and Ihadjadene, 2020). In the book "La documentation dans le numérique" by Olivier Le Deuff (Le Deuff, 2014) one gets a good impression of the reasons for the French documentalists to focus on the digital documents: are the digital documents challenging the fundament of documentation and document? The digital technology complicated the discussions of what is a document. It is no longer possible to just take a piece of paper or a book and say, here I have a document. One needs to frame and define some bits and save it as a document on the computer before being able to say, here I have a document. The digital technology and especially the world wide web has brought tremendous new opportunities for documentation, to bring some of Otlet's dreams of a total documentarium into reality. At the same time, all these opportunities have a dark side, an old challenge already formulated by Suzanne Briet (Briet and Martinet 2006) about secret documentation, not accessible for the public, as well as the new challenges about documenting oneself through and by the social media directed by the big American companies like Facebook, Google etc. This has also led to new research in the works of the pioneers, especially by Olivier Le Deuff in the works of Otlet, discussing the new digital technologies in the perspective of Otlet and his hyper-documentation visions in the light of today's society (Le Deuff, 2021). The francophone documentalists are looking into the future. The 20th annual meeting of the Document Academy will take place in Paris in September 2023, with the theme: document design.

#### 1.4 The Brazilian neo-documentalist movement

There has also been a significant interest for the neo-documentalist movement in the Portuguese speaking world of Brazil and its library and information science world which has been shown in several ways. One may talk about a Brazilian neo-documentalist movement on its own premises, "an original Brazilian Information Science neo-documentation movement" (Rodrigues and Fernanda, 2020). First, this has led to giving attention to Brazil's own history of documentation and remembering Brazilian documentation pioneers in the early 20th century up to 1950-60es, who were contemporaries with Otlet and Briet, until the early documentation movement was considered outdated and replaced by information science (Rodrigues and Fernanda 2020). Secondly, it has led to translation of the works by Otlet and Briet as well as of some of the newest neo-documentalist texts into Portuguese. Several Ph.D. projects have been conducted in Brazil since the 1990es in documentation. This has led not only to critical discussions of library and information science and questions of what kind of science is relevant for the documentation field today in Brazil, but also to a critical analysis of the anglophone neo-documentalist movement. In their article on how the notion of document has been used by the neo-documentalists compared with how it has been used and discussed in the Latin world, in France, Spain and Brazil, Ortega and Saldanha point out that several of the anglophone neo-documentalists have been using an old understanding of the notion of document, emphasizing the materiality of the document and the document as an instrument of power and to a lesser

degree have been looking into the document as understood by a user in a social context, as information and communication (Ortega and Saldanha, 2019). They show how important it is to be aware of the limits that languages pose for giving scholars the opportunity to know what is going on in the different worlds, whether they are anglo-phone, franco-phone, latino-phone, or Indonesian worlds.

## 1.5 The Indonesian neodocumentalist movement -

In Indonesia, there has also been an interest in the neo-doc movement in a special way. Indonesian documentalists have used the work by the neo-documentalists as a point of departure for making a new kind of documentation studies program in Indonesia, but also to investigate their own history of documentation studies (Sepviany 2022 and Sudarsoni, 2017). Until 2003, documentation was in Indonesia considered to be limited to written and two-dimensional objects, primarily related to libraries. After the discovery of the neo-documentalist movement by DOCAM etc. a much broader understanding emerged in Indonesia and led to establishing a study-group in documentation studies, KSKI, which was established in 2022 affiliated with the National Library of Indonesia (Perpusnas RI), the National Archives of Indonesia (ANRI) and National Research & Innovation Agency. It also led to proposing an education as well as research in not only libraries, but also archives and museums, thanks to the broad definition of a document, covering both texts, manuscripts as well as 3-dimensional objects and even live documents (Yudhawasthi and Christiani, 2021).

# 1.6 The stand of the neo-doc movement 2023 - did the name make a difference?

Where does the neo-documentalist movement stand today in 2023? Did the name make a difference? Yes, it did. The Tromsø program, now Media- and Documentation Studies, has been able to focus on the media by which the documents are created and educate librarians, archivists, and other document managers to deal with the different kinds of informative objects, a diversity of documents. (A Document (Re)turn, 2007) It has also in conjunction with UC Berkeley been able to develop an international forum for research in documentation across different languages and scientific traditions. The fact that the DOCAM meeting in 2023 is taking place in Paris with focus on document design tells a lot. The different traditions for documentation research are now beginning to stand together, to look into a shared future, perhaps a new era for documentation studies worldwide. I wonder if we may say that the different neo-documentalist movements around the world, explicitly or implicitly, have laid the ground so that we can now talk about documentation as a general scientific discipline alongside with information science and communication science etc. It does not mean that we now agree on theories, concepts etc., on the contrary, but the neo-documentalist movement has also coincided with a growing general interest in documentation in many disciplines. (Riles, 2006), (Ferraris, 2013), (Olsen, 2012) Perhaps a matter of right timing.

The American science historian Timothy Lenoir wrote about disciplines:

Disciplines are dynamic structures for assembling, channeling, and replicating the social and technical practices essential to the functioning of the political economy and the system of power relations that actualize it. (Lenoir 1993, 72)

Today, it is not a matter of whether to talk about documents or not. It is more a matter of how to talk about documents and documentation. There are discussions on documentality, documentarity and hyperdocumentation (Ferraris, 2013), (Hansson, 2016), (Day, 2019), (Le Deuff, 2021). There is a discussion to what extent it is possible to document our life in the sense of preserving traces of life. Are we moving into a future with VR technology, where everything will be indexed and documented, preserved almost 1:1? It raises a lot of questions, not least ethical questions (Le Deuff, 2021), but also questions about how to define and study documents and documentation.

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