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Publication Date

2017-07-11

Peer reviewed

Manuscript for publication in the proceedings of 11th Biennial Conference of the French ISKO Chapter : Epistemological and theoretical foundations of Information – Documentation science: a tribute to francophone pioneers, Paris, 11-12 July, 2017. Forthcoming, ISTE Editions. Published version may differ slightly.

Reflections on Suzanne Briet Michael Buckland

1. My encounter with Suzanne Briet

Nearly thirty years ago, I tried to provide a unifying perspective on collection-based information services: archives, libraries, museums, databases and records management. But I did not know how to include museum objects as a type of information. One day, visiting a museum of natural history, I saw collection of dead birds. It seemed bizarre. How could one justify using valuable space for dead birds? Being a librarian, I decided that the function of these dead birds corresponded to the role of books on library shelves. They were a resource for learning, both teaching and research. It was a dead bird library. The dead birds were documents, I decided, and that enabled me to complete my book.

Soon afterwards, when I explained my idea of dead birds as documents to Boyd Rayward he showed me some text in French about an antelope in a cage being a document. It was from Suzanne Briet's manifesto, *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* [What is documentation?] [BRI 51]. She had anticipated my thinking by nearly forty years. In my book and in two articles « Information as thing » and « What is a 'document' ? » I used Briet's antelope instead of my dead birds because she was earlier [BUC 91a, BUC 91b, BUC 97].

Impressed by Briet's ideas I began to read her other publications and then writings by Paul Otlet and other then largely forgotten European specialists of their period, including Emanuel Goldberg, who designed a search engine in Dresden in the 1920s, and Lodewyk Bendikson from Amsterdam, who pioneered photographic techniques for documentation [BUC 06; BUC 12]. I felt like an archaeologist discovering traces of a forgotten civilization. It changed my life.

Interest in Paul Otlet increased in the 1990s and led to many studies of his work. However, I believed that we would understand Otlet better if we studied him less and studied his context and his sources more. Otlet collected ideas as well as bibliographical records and museum specimens. So a suitable strategy is to assume that his selection and presentation of ideas were original, but that the ideas themselves were not, and then look for sources of his ideas. What follows is an initial attempt to apply that approach to Briet's writings

2. Briet's writings

Suzanne Briet published more a hundred books and articles [BUC 05]. Most of them are conventional professional papers on bibliography, documentation, or library services. Many others are on the history and literature of the Ardennes region around Charlesville-Mézières and the poet Arthur Rimbaud. Here I have decided to look at three rather personal books by Briet:

Entre Aisne et Meuse . . . et au delà (1976) [Between Aisne and Meuse . . . and beyond] is a volume of autobiographical notes arranged alphabetically by keyword [BRI 76].

Direction concorde (1979) [Toward harmony] is a book of meditations which she published privately at the age of 85 [BRI 79].

Qu'est-ce que la documentation? (1951) is a manifesto in which she declares the nature of documents, documentation, and documentalists [BRI 51]. (An English translation also contains extensive supplementary material about Briet and her work [BRI 06]). Despite the title, this work is a rather personal book, completed in 1951, a triumphant year for Briet. Her program of professional education for documentalists at the Conservatoire Nationale des Arts et Métiers (CNAM) had just received official recognition and designated the Institut National de Techniques de Documentation (INTD); she was Vice-President of the International Federation for Documentation (FID); and she led the French delegation to the FID conference in Rome where she talked with the Pope. The book has three parts which she dedicates to her three institutional superiors: Julien Cain at the Bibliothèque Nationale; Louis Ragey at CNAM; and Charles Le Maistre, the President of FID.

There are, however, difficulties. In these three books, unlike her other, more conventional writings, she rarely cites her sources. For example, in the first paragraph of her manifesto she quotes a statement that « Un document est une preuve à l'appui d'un fait » [A document is a proof in support of a fact] which she attributes to « Une bibliographe contemporaine soucieuse de clarté » [a

contemporary bibliographer concerned with clarity] whom she does not identify. Who said it? It is not likely to have been her friend Louise Noëlle Malclès, whose views seem quite conservative. Malclès' *Sources du travail bibliographique* provides a long list of authoritative writings on bibliography. Only two of those prior to 1951 were by women and neither includes this statement. [MAL 50, tome 1, 13-14]

Briet's meditations are full of quotations from diverse sources. She usually gives only the surname of the author of the source, so, for example, the footnotes on a typical page are simply:

(1) Imitation (2) Rimbaud (3) R. Ménard (4) Saint-Paul (5) Pagès (6) Ch. de Gaulle.

Her autobiographical notes are sometimes rather cryptic. For example, one is headed « H.A.K. » This is not explicitly explained, but refers to Hugo Andres Krüss, a German librarian credited with protecting French libraries during the German occupation. So ascertaining Briet's sources is a challenge and conclusions inferred are necessarily somewhat speculative and tentative.

3. Briet's meditations

Briet's meditations on life and society in her *Direction concorde* reveals religious, conservative, and somewhat feminist views [BRI 79]. She was Roman Catholic, but with what seems to have been a rather impersonal relationship to God, more like a generic theism. She does not appear to expect divine guidance either directly or through the Church, but she does believe in meditation, or at least introspection. She acknowledges a social psychologist named Robert Pagès as a source on introspection. His many publications include a thoughtful account of introspection, of making sense of making sense, in his *Itinéraire du seul; essai* [PAG 62], and a novel *L'exigence, roman*, in which Pierre, who lives comfortably in Paris, begins to question the purpose of his life. He comes under the influence of a charismatic cult leader, Melchisédec, and becomes disconcerted when his wife, Lucile, also starts questioning her situation in life . . . [PAG 64].

Briet's perspective is conservative. She seems to like modern poetry but not modern art or modern music. She is a feminist, but of a conservative and strongly gendered kind. She wanted fair treatment for everybody, but objected to the same treatment for both men and women: equity yes; equality no. She not only opposes abortion, but also states that contraception, homosexuality, women with short hair, and men with long hair, are all threats to the race. [BRI 79, 34-37]

Despite the problems she saw, Briet is optimistic and she provides an explanation for her optimism. A colleague at the Bibliothèque Nationale, named Paul Perrier, who wrote a description, hundreds of pages long, of human atrocities: massacres, warfare, torture, slavery, and exploitation associated with artistic and emotional behavior: *L'Unité humaine: Histoire de la civilisation et de l'esprit humain* (1931) [PER 31]. But by 1948 he had a solution. In the past, cross-cultural contacts had been mainly accidental and sporadic, he argued, but beneficial. Now, with modern society characterized by new technologies for communication and by internationalization, cross-cultural influences were becoming pervasive and institutionalized. So, with UNESCO as a symbol, a more philosophical, peaceful and harmonious world was inevitably emerging. Progress toward unity not only seemed possible but even inevitable [PER 48]. Briet approved and accorded him her longest quotation [BRI 51, 42-43; BRI 06, 40].

Another source of optimism, Raymond Ruyer, is frequently mentioned by Briet. Ruyer, a professor of philosophy in Nancy, had wide interests, including the origins of life, system theories, and the imaginings of German Romantic writers. To greatly simplify: in philosophy there is a basic division between realism, which asserts the existence of a material world independent of the mind, and idealism, which asserts that reality (or reality as we can know it) is mentally constructed and so consciousness is the important reality. Ruyer theorizes an accommodation combining both perspectives, an approach known as panpsychism. But would anyone accept his approach? He thought that his ideas would receive more attention if they were presented by American scientists. So in 1974 he published *La Gnose de Princeton : des savants à la recherche d'une religion*, in which he attributed his own ideas to unnamed American physicists and cosmologists at Princeton and Pasadena [RUY 74]. He then predicted a utopian long-term future in *Les cent prochains siècles : le destin historique de l'homme selon la nouvelle gnose américaine* [RUY 77]. Next he wrote a simple explanation with an irresistible title, *L'Art d'être toujours content : introduction à la vie gnostique* in 1978 [RUY 78]. Of course, he cannot give the names of any of these imaginary American gnostics. (He said they preferred anonymity.) And he cannot cite any of their writings. (He said they preferred to postpone publication until their ideas were perfected). So he mentions existing writers who might be considered close enough to lend credibility, such as Timothy Leary, Gregory Bateson, Gustaf Strömberg, the astronomer-author of *The soul of the universe* (1940) [STR 40], and Edward Arthur Milne, an astronomer, who wrote *Modern cosmology and the Christian idea of God* (1952) [MIL 52]. Like most readers, Briet did not recognize Ruyer's deception and she liked what she read.

There were, of course, many other influences on Briet, including the blend of science and mysticism of the urbane archaeologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardon. She

declared herself « Teilhard, more than Foucauld » in a comparison with Charles de Foucauld, a pious hermit martyred in the Algerian desert in 1916 [BRI 76, 50]. She also acknowledged Etienne Souriau's *La couronne d'herbes : esquisse d'une morale sur des bases purement esthétique* [SOU 75], which bases morality on aesthetics.

Briet had a sense of community. In her youth she had been attracted by the communitarian ideas of Kropotkin [BRI 76, 14]. She understood and was comfortable with the deeply cultural role of technology in society for which she acknowledges Pierre-Maxime Schuhl's *Machinisme et philosophie* [SCH 38] and Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* (1934) which appeared in French in 1950 [MUM 50].

Briet was a conservative, Eurocentric, sexist, Catholic, gnostic optimist. Her beliefs have diverse sources but there is a fundamental unity: « Un grand dessein anime l'Univers. Il a nom Amour, autant dire Dieu » [A great design gives life to the Universe : Its name is Love, which is to say God] [BRI 79, 9]. However, it is Briet's ideas about bibliography and documents that interest us here.

4. Bibliography

The history of bibliography is ordinarily presented as a linear progression from Conrad Gessner's *Bibliotheca universalis* of 1545 to the present with increasing completeness and standardization. But this is much too simple. As in all other fields, there were dramatic changes at the end of the nineteenth century. The year 1892 saw two notable developments. In London, the Bibliographical Society was founded. The founding President, Walter Arthur Copinger, announced in his inaugural address an agenda to advance both of bibliography's « two main branches, the first of which has reference to the contents of books, and may be termed Intellectual Bibliography; the second, to their external character, the history of particular copies, editions, &c., and may be termed Material Bibliography » [COP 93, 31] In fact, the members concentrated on material bibliography, based on physical analyses, leading to the kind of work associated with R. B. McKerrow and Fredson Bowers. However, also in 1892, Paul Otlet revealed his grand vision for intellectual bibliography in his « Un peu de bibliographie » [OTL 92; OTL 90, 11-24]. Otlet and his collaborators promoted standards, new media, and hypertext (« monographies »). Their Universal Decimal Classification constituted a strong move toward faceted classification. So, librarian Victor Chapot could write in 1907, « La bibliographie est une science assez récente, qu'a fait naître de développement prodigieux de la production » [Bibliography is a rather new science which has given birth to a prodigious development of output] [CHA 09, 29].

Briet was heir to this renaissance of bibliography. There is work to be done on the history, especially the intellectual history, of bibliography, documentation, and knowledge organization.

5. The antelope as a « primary document »

In an important passage, Briet gives examples of what can or cannot be considered to be a document:

«Une étoile est-elle un document? Un galet roulé par un torrent est-il un document? Un animal vivant est-il un document? Non. Mais sont des documents les photographies et les catalogues d'étoiles, les pierres d'un musée de minéralogie, les animaux catalogués et exposés dans un Zoo.» [Is a star a document? Is a pebble rolled by a torrent a document? Is a living animal a document? No. But the photographs and catalogues of stars, the stones in a museum of mineralogy, and the animals that are catalogued and shown in a zoo, are documents.] [BRI 51, 7; BRI 06, 10].

Further, she states, the captive antelope is a primary document and writings, documentary films, and other descriptions of it are secondary documents. The primary document is « clothed » by secondary documents.

I had never before seen such examples or such terminology. Where might they have come from? Briet does not say.

Recall the social psychologist mentioned above, Robert Pagès. In fact he had two careers. His first career was as a clandestine anarchist activist, a militant who used the pseudonym Rodion. And between these two careers, in 1946, Pagès became a student in the documentation program at CNAM founded by Jean de la Clémendière and Suzanne Briet and later designated the INTD. In 1947 he wrote a short thesis entitled « *Transformations documentaires et milieu culturel* ». The next year it was published as an article in the leading journal of documentation, the *Revue de la documentation* published by F.I.D. The article has the same title « Transformations documentaires et milieu culturel: (Essai de documentologie) » [Documentary transformations and cultural context: (Essay on documentology)] [PAG 48]. In Pagès' article are the same ideas as those published three years later in Briet's manifesto, but, unlike Briet, Pagès provides a clear explanation. In brief, graphic documents, which describe or represent something else, are derived, or « secondary », documents. But specimens and other non-graphic objects only represent themselves (as « auto-documents ») and so are primary documents. Pagès'

examples include a gorilla in a cage rather than an antelope, but is it clearly the same idea. So it seems that the teacher (Briet) learned from the student (Pagès), but maybe not. Maybe these ideas came from Briet long before she wrote her manifesto or came from some other source. It is remarkable that although the antelope has become famous the gorilla appears to have remained unnoticed.

In the literature of knowledge organization, Pagès is occasionally mentioned as the principal developer of an indexing language, « l'analyse codée » (or CODOC), which has a restricted vocabulary, extensive syntactical structures, and very concise notation [PAG 59; DEM 93]. The Semantic Code system developed soon after by James W. Perry and others at Case Western Reserve Institute has some similarity to Pagès' design.

6. Briet's examples revisited: Photograph, stone, and antelope

Briet's examples, whether they originate with her, with Pagès, or with anybody else, remain fertile and productive and I continue to return to them: The photograph of a star; the stone made into an exhibit; and the unfortunate antelope in a cage. Here are some recent reflections, which suggest that they are of more than historical interest.

6. 1. *Origins of documents*

Three origins of documents can be identified [BUC 17, 23-24]:

- i. *Created as a document.* (A conventional view);
- ii. An existing object can be *used as* a document by a creator. (An instrumental view); and
- iii. Any object may be *regarded as* a document by an interpretant regardless of the intentions, if any, of a creator, if any. (A semiotic view).

Revisiting Briet's manifesto one can see these three origins exemplified in her three examples:

- i. The photograph of the star is created as a document in the traditional sense;
- ii. The stone, if cut to reveal its inside, is an object made into a document; and

iii. The antelope, neither created nor modified by a human creator, is simply regarded as a document.

6. 2. *Beyond graphic documents*

Jean Meyriat and Jesse Shera probably thought that they were being progressive when they expanded the notion of document (and the scope of bibliography) beyond printed material to include other forms of graphic material, by which they meant physical expressions of human ideas. But it was a limited change. Briet's examples, in contrast, are a radical departure. They are simply not graphic, although one could debate the status of the photograph of a star. Unlike Meyriat and Shera, Briet and Pagès argued from a theoretical position, a semiotic or phenomenological position, a point that Shera simply did not comprehend. Jean Claude Gardin continued Pagès' ideas, but Meyriat did not.

Significant intellectual developments in the information sciences are very rare. I suggest that the (much-delayed) working-out of the implications of Briet's position – a neo-documentalist agenda – is one of the most important conceptual developments at this time in library and information studies.

6. 3. *Detachment and context*

Finally, I turn to a more radical implication of Briet's examples. The entire field of bibliography, documentation, knowledge organization, and the sciences of communication and information has been dominated by notions of sameness and transmission. Mass communication is concerned with the delivery of the same message to many people. The preservation of recorded knowledge through time and space is central to all varieties of document theory. Bibliography is very much concerned with determining whether two items are the same or not. Shannon's information theory and textual studies are both concerned with assessing and reducing « noise » and corruption. Paul Otlet's drawings illustrate well the presumption of identical sameness of 'content' through multiple diverse transitions, [e.g. OTL 34, 40-42]

It is sometimes productive to try a contrarian approach, to turn ideas upside down or inside out. So let us consider Briet's examples again:

- A photograph is taken of a star. It is immediately and increasingly obsolete because it represents a fixed point in time and space while the Universe moves dynamically on. The photo and the view diverge.

- The stone is removed from the stream, it is irreversibly changed by dissection, and moved to the very different environment of a museum display.

- The unhappy antelope is detached from its habitat and its social group to become a lonely prisoner in an unfamiliar environment, *dépaysée*.

Existing theory in knowledge organization and information science is dominated by assumptions of sameness, especially in the role of documents in mitigating the effects of time and space. Although Briet does not appear to address this point, her examples suggest the opposite. All three examples are of irreversible detachment, of physical change associated with temporal and spatial separation from their original context. Only in the rarified extremes of mathematics, logic, and computational theory are time and place erased and processes considered reversible.

There is an important corollary: because documents are material objects (whether paper, microfilm, or electronic), if they are removed from a context, they must inevitably arrive in another new and different context. As Derrida said, “il n'y a pas de hors-texte” [There is no being out of context] [DER 67, 227]. Neither we nor documents can be context-less. This is important because context influences meaning and interpretation. But if this aspect has been largely overlooked in our field, it has been noticed outside our field. This is what Ludwik Fleck was worried about when he denounced the reliability of reference works that omitted context [FLE 35]. It has also been noticed by Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith [SMI 84], by communication theorist Wilbur Schramm's concern with the differing « frames of reference » of sender and receiver [SCH 72, 31], and by political theorist Anthony Giddens:

« Besides expanding the level of time-space distanciation, writing also opens the way for those divergences of interpretation which in modern historiography have come to be called 'hermeneutics.' Writing gives rise to texts that enjoy an 'objectified' existence independent of the sustaining oral traditions in daily social practices. The 'conflict of interpretations' engendered by texts is very closely related to ideology . . . » [GID 81, 150]

The implication is that our whole field has been looking in the wrong direction, or, at least, casting a gaze that is importantly incomplete. There is research on the information seeker and the seeker's context. It seems we need a complementary research agenda on the document and its context. We should salute Bernd Frohmann's attention to this problem in a chapter entitled “The materiality of Mme Briet's antelope” [FRO 12].

7. After Briet

Briet retired from the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1954 and turned her attention to history and literature. Palermi and Polity [PAL 02] have described how the rich and promising world of francophone documentation of the 1950s – the exciting, optimistic world of Suzanne Briet, Julien Cain, Jean Claude Gardin, Eric de Grolier, Louise-Noëlle Malclès, Robert Pagès, and others – gradually dissipated. It was replaced by an emphasis on writing and on books and by the political compromise of « Sciences d’Information et de Communication ». Reflection on Suzanne Briet leads to regret that there was not more emphasis on knowledge organization.

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