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Introduction to Robert Pagès' "Documentary Transformations and Cultural Context"

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Robert Pagès (1919–2007) was an anarchist activist who later became director of a major social psychology research laboratory, the Laboratoire de la Psychologie Sociale attached to the Sorbonne and later part of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). But between these two roles he was a student in a program of professional education in documentation established in Paris by Suzanne Briet and others at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, a large and respected adult school with programs mainly in engineering and management. This program became the present National Institute for Techniques of Documentation (Institut National de Techniques de Documentation).

In 1947 while he was a student of documentation Pagès submitted a thesis entitled “Transformations documentaires et milieu culturel” (Documentary Transformations and Cultural Context) which was published as an article in the *Review of Documentation* in 1948 and in English translation in this issue. A second thesis submitted in 1948 became a book, *Problèmes de classification culturelle et documentaire* (Problems of Cultural and Documentary Classification) published in 1955.

Although he made his career in social psychology research, Pagès retained a strong interest in documentation and led the development of an indexing language known as CODOC for organizing social psychology materials in the laboratory that he directed. (An indexing vocabulary lists concepts, e.g., dog, man; an indexing language adds grammar in order to represent processes and relationships between concepts, e.g., man bites dog. He considered relationships especially important in social psychology.)

Pagès’ article on documentary transformations and cultural context presented in this issue is not easily understood. It is long, but the writing is terse and declarative, and the presentation is rather idiosyncratic. There is more assertion than explanation. The concepts and terminology in his 1940s French are rather distant from present-day English-language discourse in information studies seventy years later. So some explanation seems desirable.

Pagès regarded librarianship, archival work, and museology as artisanal specialties within a larger, more general concept of information science and information management. In France at that time this broader concept was called *documentation*, which he considered to be an evolutionary advance on earlier and more limited forms, such as librarianship, and to be concerned broadly with the role of documents in society. Accordingly, Pagès was interested in how the theory and practice of documentation relate to other academic traditions in the humanities and social sciences concerned with culture, anthropology, and sociology.

Pagès uses *document* in a very broad sense to denote any material thing regarded as signifying, as a sign or symbol. He was, remember, taught by Suzanne Briet, who in her teaching and in her writing used an antelope in a zoo as an example

of a document (Briet, 1951/2006). He explains that *knowledge (connaissance)* is ambiguous: it can be defined in a narrowly scientific sense (formal, logical, and incomplete) or broadly in a cultural sense for whatever is learned, taught, or believed.

In everyday speech, *culture* often refers to “high culture,” such opera and art exhibits, but Pagès uses *culture* in the academic, anthropological sense to mean the way we think and live. This is consistent with E. B. Tylor’s (1871, p. 1) classic definition of culture as “...that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Culture, Pagès asserts, is developed and transmitted through signs and symbols. Any object used principally for interpretation is a sign or a symbol. Documents are symbols that, with technology, may endure. Documents are representational (descriptive, mimetic) or can speak for themselves as particulars or else function as specimens representative of some culturally conceived class of objects. So documents, broadly understood, comprise a very important class of symbols.

Not only do signs and symbols represent ideas with great efficiency, but they can be combined in useful ways. Just as individual words can be combined in sentences with powerful effects, so too in indexing and classification, if provision is made for syntactical expressions, concepts can be not merely listed but also combined to denote processes and relationships. The importance of expressing relationships is reflected in his frequent references to “combinatorial symbolism” (*symbolisme combinatoire*).

The term *documentation* is ambiguous. It can refer to a set of documents or to documents generally, but it can also refer to the operations performed on and with documents. Accordingly, documentation and the analysis of symbolic activity cannot be separated. So *documentology*, the study of documents, is necessarily part of the theory of human culture. Symbols “reproduce” experience and the use of symbols is a simplification that achieves huge economies of effort.

Machinery denotes the tools and techniques available for use. With machinery we can do things that we could not do without it – or not do it as well or as efficiently. Machinery provides an extension of human capabilities. Each tool or technique has its affordances: it is good for some purposes but not for others. The choice of tool or technique, therefore has its consequences. Machinery constitutes *infrastructure*, the support than makes activities possible. For a railroad one needs a locomotive, wagons, and lines, of course, but one also needs a complex machinery of signals, administration, ticketing, and more. The capabilities of the mechanical infrastructure determine what can be done. So, in terms of documentation, any change of technique, of technology, of infrastructure, or new media, is potentially important because it changes what is possible. For this reason, the study of

documentation as the infrastructure of culture makes a good definition of the scope of information studies.

With this terminology Pagès' theme is that documentation is to culture what machinery is to industry: "*La documentation est à la culture ce que la machinerie est à l'industrie.*"

Pagès takes as a point of departure the Enlightenment ideal of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which celebrated the rational individual using evidence to validate or to develop understanding of the world. Personal, lived experience could be augmented by the stable, enduring medium of the printed book, which, once printed and bound, does not change.

Pagès claims that the rise of new media changed that simple relationship of experience, reason, and stable documents. Partly this is because new media were progressively more dynamic and less static. The development of increasingly dynamic media technologies have, he argues, changed the old distinction between lived experience and bookish knowledge into a continuum filled with new documentary forms, often visual and synoptic (e.g., diagrams, collages). New media are increasingly persuasive. They generate experiences realistic enough to constitute vicarious lived experience (e.g., the cinema) with an impact comparable that of printing. Science and science experiments generate a convincing but fallible model of reality and the commercialization of daily life transforms the ordinary into commodified experiences (e.g., tourism).

Also, our experience is less and less first-hand and direct. Increasingly our experience is second-hand, it is vicarious and represents the experiences of others. He cites the cinema and documentary films. These are realistic and influential. If we watch a program on film or, now, on television or online, it can have a significant impact. It is like first-hand experience but with an important difference: we can generally verify first-hand experience, but not vicarious experiences. There may or may not be reason to doubt, but we cannot verify. We have to accept or reject based on trust.

The situation has become more difficult by the division of labor. We no longer grow the food we eat, make the clothes we wear, or make the tools we use. It is more efficient to specialize and to exchange. But the division of labor depends on coordination, coordination depends on communication, and communication depends on documents. So we depend increasingly on documents which become more difficult to verify. Our knowledge is, more and more, second-hand, third-hand, or worse, with verification progressively harder.

Society is becoming more planned and controlled, so exercising individuality becomes more difficult. We are increasingly part of a group or of an organization. We work in teams. Increasingly we live in a world planned by others. The totalizing tendencies of technologies in society lead to "mass" everything: mass

production, mass political parties; mass warfare; planned economies; industrial monopolies; and commercialization. Competitive capitalism is constrained by pressure for collective social cohesion. Intellectual work becomes industrialized within planned organizations. Mass education leads to inequality, according to Pagès, and, mostly, prepares children to operate within the emerging, planned society rather than for critical thinking. Intelligence gets lost as image and sensation increase. Vicarious experiences are associated with symbolic (not empirical) relationships.

Societies no longer base themselves on competition, Pagès comments, but on pressures for collective cohesion, which requires careful attention to technical and social contexts. This is reflected in the commodification and commercialization of lived experience. Our lives and activities from childhood onwards are commercialized. An old village, for example, is designated as a heritage site and made into a tourist destination.

Remember that Pagès was born in France in 1919 and so he grew up during the rise of totalitarian regimes, notably Nazi Germany, Franco's dictatorship in Spain, Mussolini's fascist Italy, Stalin's Soviet Union, and then the horrors of the Second World War and the German occupation of France. Pagès was writing in 1948, before digital computers, but the dystopian aspects of present-day social media and big data would not have greatly surprised him.

Most thought-leaders in documentation in the period after the Second World War had a resolutely scientific approach. They wanted to develop "Documentation" into an "Information Science" with rigor, technology, quantification and the social respect they associated with "hard sciences." (Buckland, 1996). Pagès, however, was interestingly different. He brought a semiotic view of documentation. His deep concerns in politics and in social psychology led him to view Documentation in cultural, even political terms. In his words, documentation is to culture what machinery is to industry, and cultural context is transformed by documentation.

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