Editor’s Introduction

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Ergo dixisti et facta sunt, atque in verbo tuo fecisti ea.
(Therefore you spoke and heaven and earth were made, and you made them [by means of] your word.)
— Saint Augustine, Confessions.

1. The Dynamics of Documentation

Whether it be in Latin or in English text, the opening quotation serves to underline a complex and sometimes magical connection that exists between words and action. Indeed, from the Book of Genesis to the Gospel according to St. John and on through St. Augustine, the idea of things being done and made in words emerges repeatedly in Judeo-Christian thought.

Clearly, St. Augustine is referring to the spoken word, yet we know full well that in many traditions — Islamic and Zoroastrian as well as the Judeo-Christian — the written word, and especially, the act of writing have equally been seen as expressing aspects of divine will and action in the realm of human activity.

Our orientation to the relationship between word and deed is, of course, anchored in secular social science rather than in theology or philosophy, and in that perspective, the bond between language and doing has long been seen as a mystical or other-worldly association — of what Max Weber (1948:148) would have called a sense of enchantment. Moreover, we are more directly concerned with the role of inscription than of speech and conversation, and in that frame, it is clear that a fascination with the ways in which aspects of social organisation and social interaction have been represented in inscription, influenced and sometimes structured by inscription, has surfaced as a major theme in the work of various scholars throughout the twentieth century and into the present day. The articles collected together in these four volumes are designed in part to reflect important aspects of that long standing interest.

Naturally, inscription can encompass sketches and diagrams, charts and tables, pictograms and symbols as well as forms of grammatical writing — though of these, it is the latter (in all of its mechanical, electronic and handcrafted manifestations) that constitutes the most influential and important genre. In like manner, documents and records can also appear in a range of
media and of genres. Academic papers, architectural plans, birth certificates, clinical records, confessions (of St. Augustine and other lesser mortals), death certificates, diaries, electronic files, field-notes, film, genealogies and pedigrees, government reports, laboratory notebooks, letters, maps, memos, photographs, sound recordings and street-level graffiti, all have a place on the list. Though in this collection, it is genres anchored in writing and drawing, rather than film or speech that have prominence.

Words and language, speech and writing, inscription and documentation – we have a mélange of concepts to unravel, almost before we begin. Ultimately, however, what I primarily wish to illustrate and to demonstrate in this collection is, how the relationship between documentation (in its multitude of manifestations) and human action plays itself out in disparate ways over many different ‘fields’. In a secular culture, of course, inscription and documentation are commonly represented as inert phenomena and as subordinate to human, rather than God’s will and purpose; yet as many articles in these volumes demonstrate, documents and records (and the graphic symbols within) can have the potency to shape, pattern and drive interactions every bit as much as the humans that claim to have ‘authored’ them. Our task is to explore that potency and that dynamism with social scientific insight.

2. Documents and Social Scientific Data

I have stated that the role of documents and records as a key source of social scientific data has been recognized for many decades. In the twentieth century American social science, for example, their significance in such a role was reviewed and extensively discussed by the likes of Allport (1942), Blumer (1939), Gottschalk, Kluckhohn and Angell (1945) as well as numerous others. The names of the aforementioned authors are probably unfamiliar to modern readers, yet, in their day, they exerted a considerable influence on the development of various fields of social science – ranging from anthropology and criminology through politics and sociology and onto social psychology. The documents they reviewed covered such items as family letters written by members of Chicago’s Polish community during the 1910s, the personal diaries of immigrants and criminals, life histories of delinquent boys and jack-rollers, Navaho Indians and Chicago gang members. Plummer (2001) provides an excellent and more recent overview of relevant studies. In addition, of course, mid-century social scientists were also aware of the importance to the design and support of empirical social research projects of various public and administrative documents such as the census, as well as court, crime, financial, newspaper and other kinds of record (see, for example, Wheeler, 1969). Indeed, it was often the role of the public and administrative record in social research that was underlined and highlighted in the textbooks of the age.

In her history of research methods in America, Platt (1996) points to various ways in which ‘documents’ entered into the life stream of the research process. She also provides a particularly useful list (1996:35) of social research methods texts published in the USA between 1920 and 1960 – many of which provided advice on how to analyse as well as collect documentary materials. Unfortunately, and despite the diversity of sources that were available as data, the general approach to their study was rather uniform; namely a focus on content. Indeed, the primary method of document analysis recommended from the 1940s onward, was content analysis – see, for example, Beelenson (1952), Festinger and Katz (1953) and Goode and Hatt (1952) – and, as I shall indicate below, the marked preference for analysis of content persists today. Yet, it was and is quite clear that the ‘diary’, the ‘letter’, the ‘life-h-story’ as well as many other types of document – such as the field-note, the research memo and the questionnaire – not only have content, but also fulfill certain kinds of function in social research. In short, it is evident that documents ‘do’ things as well as contain things and that they are active both in the research process (as ‘instruments’), and in the everyday settings in which research is undertaken.

The importance of ‘function’ as well as of content, is undoubtedly well represented in the concept of an instrument, and it is evident that reflections on the nature and use of research instruments have appeared in published accounts of the research process over some decades. Thus, to cite just a few examples, Lundberg’s (1929) text on social research contained reflections on the taking and writing of field-notes as instrument, as did the Webb’s Methods of Social Study (1932). Hyman’s Interviewing in Social Research (1954) reflected on the role of both the interviewer and the interview schedule in social research and Glaser and Strauss (1967) highlighted the role of the research ‘memo’ in shaping the collection and interpretation of qualitative data. Unfortunately, and as I have just argued, the attention of most of the aforementioned authors was steadily fixed on issues relating to instrument content and composition and rarely on the influence of the instrument in the ‘field’ (i.e. the influence on action). No wonder then that the use of documents in social research has been repeatedly associated with ‘unobtrusive’ methods (Lee, 2000). Babbie, for example, in his widely read methods text on the practice of social research – 1st edition 1975, 12th edition, 2010 – explicitly links the study of documents to such methods.

This view of documents as somewhat peripheral to action and interaction continues to predominate in contemporary text-book and ‘handbook’ discussions of their role. It is most commonly associated with the idea that documents and humans, text and action, exist in entirely separate realms, and that whilst humans are active, text is inactive. Across the decades and across all levels of research expertise, one can see these claims echoed repeatedly – see, for example, Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2006:168); Bryman (2004:370).
3. Four Approaches to the Study of Documents and Records

I am arguing, then, that the prevailing view of the role and nature of documents and records in social research is somewhat limited and limiting. It is built on the belief that content is king and it implies that the key research techniques for handling documents as data sources should be related to the styles of content or thematic analysis. There is, of course, nothing wrong with content analysis per se, and it often constitutes an important point of departure for many different types of data analysis. Indeed, examination of content can shift into more interesting forms of discourse analysis and the article by Hanks (article 2) reproduced in this volume, makes reference to numerous and divergent styles of such analysis. Naturally, whenever 'discourse' is invoked, there is, at least, some recognition of the notion that documents might actually play a part in structuring the world rather than merely reporting on it or describing it. For example, there is a considerable tradition within social studies of science and technology for examining the place of scientific rhetoric in structuring notions of 'nature' and the position of human beings (especially as scientists) within nature. The role and structure of scientific rhetoric in text (and talk) has, for example, figured in the work of Bazerman (1988); Gilbert & Mulkay (1984); Gross (1996); Kay (2000); and Myers (1990). However, little, if any of that work situates documents as anything other than as inert objects, either constructed by, or waiting patiently to be activated by scientists – Bazerman’s article (article 50) in Volume 4 of this collection does, nonetheless, break new ground in this regard.

In the tradition of the ethnethodologists and some adherents of discourse analysis, it is also possible to argue that documents might be more fruitfully approached as 'topic' (Zimmerman and Pollner; 1971) rather than resource, in which case the focus would be on the ways in which any given document came to assume its present content and structure. (There has been a somewhat parallel concern with the nature and status of interview data in social research – see, for example, Holstein and Gubrium, 1997.) In the field of documentation, these latter approaches are akin to what Foucault (1970) might have called an 'archaeology of documentation', and are well represented in studies of such things as how crime, suicide and other statistics and associated official reports and policy documents are routinely generated. Numerous examples of this approach are provided in the articles contained in Volume 2 of this collection.

Unfortunately, the distinction between topic and resource is not always easy to maintain – especially in the hurly-burly of doing empirical research (see, for example, Prior, 2003). Puttting an emphasis on 'topic', however, can open up a further dimension of research, and that concerns the ways in which documents function in the everyday world. And as I have already hinted, when we focus on function, it becomes apparent that documents serve not merely as containers of content, but as active agents in the episodes of interaction and schemes of social organisation.

In this vein, one can begin to think of an ethnography of documentation. Therein, the key research questions revolve around the ways in which documents are used and integrated into specific kinds of organisational settings, as well as how they are exchanged and how they circulate within such settings. Clearly, documents carry content – words, images, plans, ideas, patterns and so forth – but the manner in which such material is actually called upon and manipulated, and the way in which it functions, cannot be determined (though it may be constrained) by an analysis of content. Indeed, once a text or document is sent out into the world there is simply no predicting how it is going to circulate and how it is going to be activated in specific social and cultural contexts. For this reason alone, a study of content, especially what the author(s) of a given document (text) 'meant' or intended can only ever add up to limited examination of what a document 'is'. The article by Zeitlyn in Volume 3 of this collection (Article 34) illustrates the salient issues perfectly. His focus is on divination, and he demonstrates how the very same text can be repeatedly used as a basis for constructing entirely different 'interpretations'. The text has meaning only in the context of its use and its nature is defined by its use.

Documents, of course, constitute a form of what Latour (Article 31) would refer to as ‘immutable mobiles’, and with an eye on the mobility of documents, an emerging interest in the histories of knowledge that seek to examine how the same documents have been received and absorbed quite differently by different cultural networks is worth noting (see, for example, Burke, 2000). A parallel concern has arisen with regard to the newly emergent ‘geographies of knowledge’ (see, for example, article 61 by Livingstone in Volume 4 of this collection). In the history of science, there has also been an expressed interest in the biography of scientific objects (Latour, 1987:262), or of ‘epistemic things’ (Rheinberger, 2000) – tracing the history of objects, independent of the ‘inventors’ and ‘discoverers’ to which such objects are conventionally attached; it is an approach that could be easily extended to the study of documents. Note, how in all of these cases, a key consideration is, how documents as ‘things’ circulate and translate from one culture to another: issues of content are secondary.

Clearly, studying how documents are used and how they circulate can constitute an important area of research in its own right. Yet, even those who focus on document use can be overly anthropocentric and subsequently over-emphasise the potency of human action in relation to the written text.
Table 1: Approaches to the study of documents

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of research approach</th>
<th>Document as resource</th>
<th>Document as topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>(1) Approaches that focus almost entirely on what is ‘in’ the document.</td>
<td>(2) ‘Archaeological’ approaches that focus on how document content comes into being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use &amp; function</td>
<td>(3) Approaches that focus on how documents are used as a resource by human actors for purposeful ends.</td>
<td>(4) Approaches that focus on how documents function in, and impact on schemes of social interaction, &amp; social organisation.</td>
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Source: Prior, L. Sociology, 2008: 42.5:825.

In that light, it is interesting to consider ways, in which we might reverse that emphasis and to study, instead, the potency of text and the manner in which documents can ‘perform’ organisational activities as well as reflect them. The opening article of Volume 4, by Cooren (Article 48), attempts to do just that. It is an article that is representative of novel ways of examining how documents can structure human activity and its themes are echoed in a number of other articles in that volume.

An overview of the selected articles is provided in the sections that follow, but before I venture into that overview, I am going to suggest a typology (Table 1) of the ways in which documents have come to be, and can be considered in social research.

Whilst accepting that no form of categorical classification can capture the inherent fluidity of the world, its actors and its objects, Table 1 is aimed at offering some understanding of the various ways in which documents have been dealt with by social researchers. Thus, approaches that fit into Cell 1 have been dominant in the history of sociology and of social science generally. Therein, documents (especially as text) have been scoured and coded for what they contain in the way of descriptions, reports, images, representations and accounts. In short, they have been scoured for evidence. Data analysis strategies concentrate almost entirely on what is in the ‘text’ (via various forms of content analysis, thematic analysis, or even grounded theory). This emphasis on content is carried over into Cell 2 type approaches, with the key differences that analysis is concerned with how document content comes into being. The attention here is usually on the conceptual architecture and socio-technical procedures, by means of which written reports, descriptions, statistical data and so forth are generated. Various kinds of discourse analysis have been used to unravel the conceptual issues, whilst a focus on socio-technical and rule-based procedures, by means of which clinical, police and other forms of records and reports are constructed, has been well represented in the work of ethnmethodologists. In contrast, and in Cell 3, the research focus is on the ways, in which documents are called upon as a resource by various and different kinds of user. Here, a concern with document content or how a document has come into being are marginal, and the analysis concentrates on the relationship between specific documents and their use or recruitment by identifiable human actors for purposeful ends. I have already pointed to some studies of the latter kind in the above paragraphs and further references to such work are also available in Volume 3. Finally, the approaches that fit into Cell 4 also position content as secondary. The emphasis here is on how documents as ‘things’ function in the schemes of social activity, and with how such things can drive, rather than be driven by, human actors—in short, the spotlight is on the *vita activa* of documentation. Many of the articles in Volume 4 reflect this approach, as do a number of my own studies that have been published elsewhere (see, for example, Prior, 2003; 2008).

The choice of articles in these four volumes is designed to illustrate the diverse approaches referred to above, and to suggest to the reader different ways in which the social researcher can benefit from a focus on documents and records. The selected articles were not, of course, written with these volumes in mind—each and every author having composed their words in the context of their own personal projects. Nevertheless, to read these articles in the light of the issues that I have sketched out above will hopefully suggest new ways of thinking, new ways of doing and new ways of asking questions about the role of documentation in social affairs.

4. Writing and Content

I have suggested above that documents as sources of data tend to be regarded as mute, inert and otherwise detached components of most social scientific research settings. Given that tendency it is not so surprising that there are relatively few articles that explicitly examine the role of ‘documents’ in the research process. There are, of course, numerous articles whose findings are dependent on the collection and analysis of documents, but their main point of focus is normally on a substantive issue of some kind. One implication of this state of affairs is that in identifying articles for a collection such as the current one, it is not possible to select ‘methods’ articles purely and simply. The best that one can do is to select articles that have been largely dependent on either gathering, analysing or simply discussing the nature of documentary data, and to approach the articles as illustrative of the kinds of materials that can be studied and used. That has been the guiding theme for inclusion in these volumes.

Volume 1 opens with a scene setting article by Goody and Watt on the consequences of writing and literacy for human culture. Their article is broad and comparative in scope and draws extensively on anthropological and historical data. The authors indicate that all forms of writing—whether based on pictograms or alphabetic and phonetic principles—have a profound impact on key aspects of human social organisation. Above all, writing as technology enables one to record—details of things, people, events and ideas.