Walks Like a Doc, Talks Like a Doc

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Introduction

Increasingly, even within chirographic culture, the use of orality as a valid mode of expression has become more formally recognized. For example:

- The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage explicitly recognizes the value of "oral traditions and expressions" (UNESCO, 2003).
- According to the Native American Graves Repatriation Act (1990), claims for the return of Native American remains and artifacts to their tribes may be made on the basis of evidence from the oral tradition.
- The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) has drafted provisions to protect traditional knowledge and folklore from being patented or copyrighted by those outside the originating community (WIPO, 2006).
- Knowledge from the oral tradition directly led to the survival of the native population of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands after the December 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia. This phenomenon was widely reported in the news media (as in Bhaumik, 2005).
- In September 2006, the president of the United States proposed legislation to create military commissions to try suspected terrorists. This legislation—currently under congressional debate—renders hearsay evidence admissible in court (White House press release, 2006).

This treatment of orally transmitted information should make it a relevant topic for discussion within information science. In this paper, three different angles related to orality and oral documents are discussed:

The Materiality of Oral Documents (by Deborah Turner)

This section of the paper explores the materiality of oral documents as indicated by their institutionalized, physical, and reproducible nature. Not all utterances are oral documents. Criteria for distinguishing between spoken word and oral document status stems mainly from acknowledging that social structures render certain kinds of speech differently significant. Performance, retelling of the oral tradition, recitations of poetry, speeches,

judicial statements, and words spoken on one's death bed are speech acts that may be deemed oral documents.

Institutionalization

Social constructionism tells us that in order to understand society, we must examine the dynamic nature of discourse embedded in a given context. Constructionism assumes language helps constitute both individual selves and meaning by lending itself to discourse, which is essential to the construction of "the boundaries of social knowledge" (Talja, Tuominen, and Savolainen, 2005; p. 89). In this way, discourses are characterized as both "repositories" and as "entities" necessary for knowledge production (Talja, Tuominen, and Savolainen, 2005; p. 89). Philipsen focuses on the role that such repositories of speech play in larger cultural processes. He examines how speech "can be understood as an approach to investigating the premises and practices of shared identity" (Philipsen in Carbaugh, 2005; p. 126). Discourse not only reflects social context, it simultaneously maintains and perpetuates it. The rather serious work of perpetuating context depends upon the existence, content, and interpretations of specific kinds of oral documents. Each social entity determines the type of speech acts considered to be oral documents. In turn, oral documents significantly influence social processes. According to Foucault, as explained by Frohmann, institutionalized social processes help make up the materiality of documents (Frohmann, 2004; p. 8-9). Oral documents exist as an example of an "institutionally legitimated material practice" (Frohmann, 2004; p. 11). This legitimization gives oral documents weight, or materiality.

Physicality

In addition to being embedded in institutionalized practices, the materiality of a document refers to its physicality. Whereas *speech* refers to the broad range of linguistic and non-linguistic communicative acts, *voice* is limited to the soundings an individual makes. Zumthor, a literary theorist who focuses on Western orality, discusses how the "material qualities [of voice]—tone, timbre, volume, register—can be described and [how] custom has assigned to each a symbolic value" (Zumthor, 1990; p. 5). He describes numerous examples of such assignments: a tenor tends to be associated with masculinity; a soprano, femininity. He states that "around this [interpretation of] voice the social bond is strengthened and solidified" (Zumthor, 1990; p. 5).

In this statement, Zumthor distinguishes between voice and speech, and he posits spoken word as an object. Or more simply, he writes, "voice is *thing*" (Zumthor, 1990; p. 4-5). This assertion lends support to the idea that an oral document is a product of both voice and speech. Oral documents not only exist, but they also transmit information about the person who gives voice to them, and they transmit information through their speech

content. Separating voice from speech supports the idea that an oral document is a statement that does indeed exist (Frohmann, 2000; p. 8). In fact, oral documents exist on two levels: while voice could be considered the purview of the individual; speech could be considered the purview of the social, the institution. An oral document sits partly in an institution (as described in the previous section) and partly in the acts of speaking and being heard. For instance, an oral document, like the annual State of the Union address in the United States, exists partly as an institutionalized, ritualized speech and partly as an utterance voiced by the individual holding the title of U.S. president. Again, the physical nature of an oral document is dependent on both an individual's voice and on socially prescribed speech. Although it's important to note the social dimension of oral documents, the point I make here is an oral document has materiality because it incorporates voice.

Representation

A document's materiality is partially determined by how it, or more specifically how its contents and their associated meanings, can be reproduced (Frohmann, 2004; p. 396). In effect, the content of documents aids memory. Fentress and Wickham (an anthropologist and a historian) discuss how memory is socially informed. Although the information in memory is not stable, its collective ideas and shared images are (Fentress and Wickham, 1992; p. 59). Memory "insures the preservation of collectively held ideas and enables their diffusion and transmission" (Fentress and Wickham, 1992; p. 59). Memory presupposes and informs speech. Fentress and Wickham claim that written documents derived from oral ones may be considered an effort to "recontextualize social memory" (1992; p. 85-86).

I assert similarly, that oral documents recontextualize memory. In this way, oral documents have materiality. They have materiality in the way they are institutionalized, they have physicality, and they represent social memory.

The Fixity of Documents and the Fluidity of Works (by Melanie Feinberg)

In considering orally expressed material as documents, one might object that the apparent fluidity of oral transmission cannot be reconciled with the idea of fixity associated with recorded documents. I contend, however, that this fluidity is a property of the oral expression as a *work,* and not as a *document.* When looking at, for example, the Yugoslav oral poetry described by Alfred Lord as compared to written poetry, such as the chain of Byron manuscripts described by Jerome McGann, it is the idea of what constitutes a work that is primarily different, not the idea of a document (Lord, 2000; McGann, 1983).

Textual scholars, who attempt to discriminate between differences found in multiple versions of literary material, for example to create critical editions, usefully distinguish between the concepts *document, text,* and *work.* (While these terms are used in information science as well, they are often imprecisely differentiated.) The *text* is a particular expression of semantic content: the sequence of words and punctuation that makes up a version of *Hamlet,* for example. The *document* is the physical embodiment of the text: those words that make up a version of *Hamlet* as manifested in a printed book or on a Web page (Tanselle, 1990; Williams and Abbot, 1999). The *work*—that which, in the words of Paul Eggert (1999), "underwrites the sameness" of variant texts—is more nebulous. Some textual critics identify the work with authorial intention; the work becomes an ideal entity that might never have been expressed as a single text (Tanselle, 1990). (A similar view is often expressed in information science.) Other lines of textual scholarship, however, have expanded the idea of the work to a production process (McGann, 1983) or even more generally to a pragmatic regulative principle (Eggert, 1998).

Drawing on this line of thinking, I suggest that *work* is a dynamic category that relates textual versions. (This may be close to what Patrick Wilson[1989] meant when he asserted that "the text of the work *is* the work.") Texts that constitute a work are fixed; the work, however, may be fluid, changing as more texts are added to the work set, as interpretations of the texts change, and in different contexts of use. One implication of such a definition is that structure of the work as a class cannot be described generically. For a Byron poem, we may be able to identify a chronological chain of versions emanating from a single progenitor text, and we might discuss the validity of an authoritative version based on interpolation of the poet's intentions. For Yugoslav oral epic as described by Lord, the messiness of multiple versions is not related to each telling's status as a document—we have a physical embodiment of a particular expression; although the physicality is sound waves and may be ephemeral, each instance is fixed in time—but as a work. We cannot rely on traditional markers such as authorship or a chain of texts linked to a single ancestor.

In the Parry-Lord model of oral epic poetry, compositions are formed through the intersection of a communal stock of literary elements with the exigencies of a particular performance (Lord, 2000). The traditional elements exist on a variety of levels, from phrases and images (formulas) to brief narrative units, such as a council or the writing of a letter (themes), to the succession of narrative units that structures a particular type of song (one cited by Lord is "disguise, journey, deceptive story, recognition, games or tests, wedding"), to a specific narrative (such as the story of Smailagic Meho's wedding) (Lord, 2000; p. 122). Lord asserts that it is impossible to trace the descent of a particular

song through the apparatus of personal authorship and linear relationship that are often appropriate for written literary texts: "...our concept of 'the original' of 'the song' simply makes no sense in the oral tradition" (Lord, 2000; p. 101). Components in the communal stock do evolve; however, "...the process of building formulas is so quiet and unspectacular and so slow that it is almost imperceptible" (Lord, 2000; p. 43). While the role of the individual singer can be important, the significance of a particular performer seems to be mostly in the perceived quality of a textual variant, not in narrative structure. Further, this quality is not based in the performance of any particular song, but in the singer's general ability to elaborate themes that can be used anywhere. Lord's favorite singer, Avdo Mededovic, excelled, in Lord's opinion, at any song he attempted, not just at one tale.

Instead of authorship or even of story, Lord suggests that the primary regulating principle for oral epic is the song type, a basic sequence of narrative units that may underlie many songs. He describes, for example, "a pattern of captivity and freedom" that structures a large group of songs dealing with such diverse actions as the return of the hero, rescues, weddings, and the capture of a city. (Not all weddings or city captures involve this pattern, but some do.) Lord contends that "the songs of this whole group are basically one song"; they are almost similar, and thus we might consider them the same work (Lord, 2000; p. 122).

If we are to define the concept of work differently based on context, then it's necessary to define the scope of each definition. The scope of the definition of the work for oral poetry, as proposed in the previous paragraph, depends on the extent to which one accepts the Parry-Lord argument. While Lord wants to extend the theory to the oral epic in general (or at least to Homer), some literary scholars contest the model's appropriateness for all cases. Ruth Finnegan, for example, describes how some oral poetry in the Pacific Islands is collaborative, composed in advance, and practiced: it is not individually improvised in the manner described by Lord. Although it is not clear if the pattern structure described by Lord comes into play or not, Finnegan definitely makes a case for a stronger sense of authorship for Pacific Islands oral poetry (Finnegan, 1988). Based on the cogency and appropriateness of competing arguments, the scope of my proposed definition of the work for oral poetry might be limited: to Yugoslav oral epic, for example, which is where Parry and Lord obtained the primary data by which their theory was developed.

Oral Documents and Information Management (by Kari Holland)

If there is such a thing as oral documents, and I contend that there is, then how do we treat them in information management?

In the literature on documents and documentation, the content of the document in the form of the work that is contained in the document does not appear to be discussed much. Rather, it is the facts, or ideas, that are the center of attention (Briet, 2006, p. 18; Buckland, 1991, p. 586). The identifying attributes of these ideas (hereafter named *the work*) or the identifying attributes of the document that contains the work also needs more attention, as we use these attributes to represent a certain document in an information system so that it can be retrieved. The theoretical and practical literature on library cataloging presents a solution as to how we can conceptually frame an oral document so that it obtains indexicality, that is, how it can be placed in an organized system in relationship to other evidence (Buckland, 1997, p. 806, citing Day). We can do this by focusing on the work.

As Feinberg points out in the previous section of this paper, documents are not works, and works are not documents. Works are embedded in documents, but they can exist without being embedded: "the existence and the vicissitudes of the work are not confined to any particular book" (Lubetzky, 2001, p. 271). Another cataloging theorist, in his thesis on the functions and objects of the author-title catalog, states that the integral part of the objects we provide information on in a catalog is non-material, meaning the abstract object work (Domanovszky, 1974, p. 100). It appears that the work is a very important component of documents upon which we could focus. This is where library systems design is moving. It is moving from the physical item in hand (Svenonius, 2001, p. 108) to focusing on the work (IFLA, 1998). The model of a record presented in the report Functional Requirements of Bibliographic Records (FRBR) is built around the notion of a work. FRBR builds on the ideas of Lubetzky and others and presents the following definition of work: "a distinct intellectual or artistic creation" (IFLA, 1998, p.16) which means the work is seen as an abstract notion without physicality. By this definition, information transmitted orally, for instance, tales existing in an oral tradition, can very well be treated as works, and the entity that is the work has its own identifying attributes.

Included in FRBR's list of possible attributes for this entity are the following: title, form, date, intended audience, context for the work and medium of performance (IFLA, 1998, p. 32-33). Tales originating from oral tradition contain all of these. Nicolas (2005) has duly noted how FRBR facilitates the inclusion of oral tradition into the bibliographic record universe, which means that this type of an oral document can be organized in a meaningful relationship with other evidence and thereby obtain documentary status.

Even if an absent physicality no longer poses any problems to the inclusion of oral documents in information systems, as we now have identifying attributes we can use to represent the oral document under the notion of a work, there is still a problem at the other end of the information system, that of retrieval. In particular, there are two aspects to the problem, one is the undoubtedly ephemeral nature of an oral document, the other is, of course, the limitations to what can be retrieved, compared to physical documents.

If we agree that an antelope in a zoo is a document (Briet, 2006, p.10) and that the information about this antelope is the work of this particular document, then there is also an ephemeral facet to this antelope in the various versions of the work the antelope represents, as long as we are talking about one particular antelope. When that antelope dies, it might well be replaced by another antelope, or even if the first one is stuffed, the particulars of this one as the living, captured antelope are gone. If one is a veterinarian studying the medical conditions of antelopes that are kept in zoos, then one antelope as a document will perhaps contain different information than another. The living antelope also contains different versions of the work than does the stuffed one. Different storytellers may tell the same story in different versions. And as one single storyteller may change some details of the story throughout her lifetime, so can the medical condition of the antelope change, thereby changing the information it contains as a document. It still appears that the literature on documents accepts this as part of the nature of a document, because the antelope is cataloged and in a zoo. One might inventory the representation of a storyteller and her tales in the same way and as long as she lives, this particular version of the work, this oral document can be managed. An ephemeral nature is not contrary to documentary status. And longevity of the core idea can be preserved in the system in the different versions of the work.

It is the retrieval of the work that will take a different form than for tangible (or digital) documents. In order for someone to gain access to this work, or rather a particular version of this work, they will need to observe the event of the tale being told. This is contrary to how we think about information systems today, as Buckland notes: “mechanical information systems can only operate on physical representations of ‘information’” (Buckland, 1997, p. 804). I would contend that this depends upon what type of an information system we are talking about, and it is not too far-fetched to envision a digital library for a culture that has an oral tradition that takes into consideration the way this culture transfers information, by way of oral documents, which can be represented as works in the digital library.

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