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Documents and personas: how libraries create and consume texts, and why it matters

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The consumption and production of documents is fundamental to an organisation's efforts to project itself. The choices about in-coming documents: what they take, discard, adapt, combine and about out-going documents they forge out of them are integral to an organisation's persona, and to the visibility and influence it wishes to achieve. It is especially important to libraries now, given the challenges they face, to brand their services effectively, to win recognition of their value, and to attract interest and support. Libraries must look to their capacity to draw on information, to marshal and project it advantageously, so that they can achieve visibility. For, as things stand, under our political culture, visibility is a key asset – one that is, once achieved, readily convertible to political patronage, funding, and other good things from the commonweal. These are all things that are vital to a process in which libraries can make both a contribution to the well-being of their constituency and themselves prosper so that contribution can continue.

Libraries are, then, actors in a 'drama of visibility', in which a variety of different agents and interests compete for the vital quality of being *noticed*, upon which they rely to gain requisite support to pursue their purpose, especially when they rely on the public purse. In this, in- and out-going documents are of critical importance – fundamental to the whole process. This paper looks at the fortunes of two documents subjected to a research cycle occurring within Northern Territory Library, analysing the pressures and challenges they face, and the characteristics that help or hinder them in this process. The paper is a step toward a grounded account of document use and production that can embrace the often surprising interplay between document design, content and context, and between their intellectual content and their pragmatic use.

The documents

Libraries Building Communities (Oxley 2005) and *Australian Bookstart* (Bundy 2004) are documents circulating in the public domain. They are both, in essence, policy and advocacy documents that seek to propose positive definitions of libraries' role and their engagement with the community. As such, they represent attempts both to seek a higher profile for the value libraries deliver and to define new directions amongst a bewildering array of choices on future strategy. *Libraries Building Communities* (*LBC*) does this by presenting survey data on the contribution of public libraries to Victorian communities. It is described as the largest survey of public libraries yet conducted in Australia (Oxley 2005, Executive Summary p.5). *Australian Bookstart* makes a more subtle contribution to these imperatives by making a case for libraries' involvement in early literacy – that they *are* involved and that they should be.

Northern Territory Library's interest in *LBC* is as a potential model for policy documents, and as a direct source of hard data that can feed into policy communications: in short, as ammunition for arguments to government on the value – and resource requirements – of library services. Northern Territory Library's particular interest in *Australian Bookstart* is to assess the document's usefulness as an intellectual foundation for a coordinated *Bookstart* program proposed for the Territory.

Through the research process Northern Territory Library has taken different things from the two documents and applied different levels of focus to them, under different conditions. *LBC* is one of a range of documents under attention as part of a policy development process. *Australian Bookstart* has attracted stronger individual focus as, potentially, the basis for a program that may entail considerable future expenditure. Anticipated outputs were that *LBC* would be a model for documents designed to raise the organisation's profile to government, and that its influence would be expressed in policy documents, particularly at a 'motherhood' level, saying what libraries can and do provide uniquely amongst all other services. Statistical characterisations of value emerging from the document attracted particular interest. Perhaps these could telegraph libraries' importance within the compressed spaces of ministerial briefs and the other outward-going documents, through which cases must be made. Brevity is a critical factor in the effectiveness of this kind of communication. Outputs for the research process on *Australian Bookstart* have been a separate report and actions to be undertaken, potentially, on the strength of its recommendations and any others arising from the research cycle – responding, adding to or criticizing elements of the original document.

Whatever the contrasts, however, between the two – the conditions under which they are created or consumed – there is a strong thread of commonality that is useful to consider. These documents are both utterances in a wider conversation in the library world centering on the value that library services generate, how to describe it, and how best to convey that message to the audiences that matter, within the real-life constraints of audiences' limited time and attention. Speakers in this 'discourse on value' extend from top-level players, such as the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) and the UK Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), to the local level, for we are all faced by the need to project messages on value, and by the challenges of getting the message through. And like other documents in this discourse, *LBC* and *Australian Bookstart* are both utterances in this wider conversation and fodder for the production of other utterances in the exchange.

Theoretical dimensions

How then are these two documents brought under the organisational microscope, and what kinds of dynamics are brought into play? We often make the error of underestimating the complexity of this process. How is it that documents – and some parts of documents, in particular – attract attention sufficiently to have their influence manifested in new documents? We tend to default to a view of documents in which they are unproblematic carriers of information, exemplified in 'conduit metaphors' that figure information in terms of simple physical objects (Brown & Duguid 2000, p.184). Even in more enlightened accounts that address documents' significance as mediators of social interaction, which would appear to open the way to more mutable models of document properties, there can be an apparently contradictory emphasis on their 'fixity' (Brown & Duguid 2000, pp. 97-198). This sits uneasily with the fragmentation, selection and synthesis that are evident when we consider the forces that documents experience in pathways to the creation of new documents: a decidedly less orderly, and more interesting, business entirely.

This is a complex area. But dynamics in the cycle of document consumption and production – that is, reading leading to writing – can be identified. First, the reader decides whether a document is worthy of attention, and what level of attention (Schriver 1997, p.164). If a tacit 'contract' of credibility is established between reader and text, reading becomes possible. From this point the dynamic of document consumption is organised by a dialectical process of inward and outward movement: *in* to engage with particular points and the details of evidence; *out* to scan other sources to see the arguments in context – that is, to see the conversation in which this is an utterance and to have its propositions confirmed or denied by others. Logically this starts with referenced sources, but may, as in these instances, take a broader trajectory to place things in a wider perspective beyond cited sources. Clearly, readers

do this even without immediate resort to other documents, because reading itself consists of a constant process of creating associations and envisaging cases that either instantiate what's being described on the page or invalidate it. These 'movements' are indeed an integral part of the process of document consumption.

Both of these movements – out and in – involve a potential blurring of the reader's image of the document to hand. For when the reader engages in outward movement the primary object of interest must share attention with others, and thus suffers some de-emphasis. Less obviously, a similar process applies for inward movement: intense focus on document components – on fine detail – reduces a reader's ability to retain an image of the document as a whole. The process is in some sense hazardous, involving shifts and transfers of attention that modify, obscure or strengthen the reader's image of the document (Iser 1972, p. 283). A risk always exists that the reader might not return to the primary text, perhaps because their estimation of it has been influenced for the worse by other material encountered. Conversely, some other data may resonate with something in the document, so that the reader returns with an amplified sense of its importance. It is an iterative and dynamic process in which, so long as the document in question continues to attract attention, the reader's image of it develops, conditioned by the various positive and negative inflections applied to it during her journey.

Clearly, these processes most often do not apply to the document as a unitary object, unless the outcome is outright rejection. More usually, there are different effects on different document elements, depending on a sense of association (that is, relevancy) that may either reinforce or undermine the significance of particular items. Understanding the application of this process to document components is particularly important because reading is, essentially, a process of selection. Even for articles rather than books, no reader – even their creators – can sustain a comprehensive image of a document in all its parts, and preserve a sense of its successive levels of overriding organisation, at one end of generality, or of detail, at the other end of the spectrum. Rather, readers create a *de facto* image of a document to which they refer and which provides a kind of mnemonic, on the basis of which they can return to the document and re-access its content to supplement their mental image. Recollections of texts are recollections of *parts* of texts, and so selection is a given – part and parcel of the whole equation of document consumption (Iser 1972, p.285).¹

Selection occurs as the result of a process of attraction and repulsion, generated by the imperatives of the organisational task, and by the inflow of new material as document elements are amplified or attenuated. The role of context is critical. New contextual settings assign new values to textual elements – positive or negative – or, merely by placing them in a new setting, give them such a different spin as to make them, at times, appear wholly different from that judged in previous perceptions.² Clearly, the role of interlocutors in the conversation surrounding the process is also important. Selection is mediated by concepts of relevance that emerge from the comments of human actors involved in the process of reception, and will be adopted on a basis either of the actor's seniority within the organisation, comments' logical consistency (hopefully) or apparent congruence with an existing setting.

¹ This is an adaption of ideas canvassed by Iser (1972, p. 285), who proposes that for 'all literary texts ... we may say that the reading process is selective', because the reader decides how to fill in 'gaps' presented by the text, thus choosing certain avenues and denying others. Iser's article has provided points of departure for a number of the arguments in this paper, albeit with considerable changes in context and application. Where Iser assumes materials arising from within the (single) literary text, this paper addresses the role of those external to the text, and extends the argument to organisational documents

² This adapts Iser's discussion (1972, p. 285).of the reader's production of meaning in a literary text.

We can see then that the process inherently involves risk for documents and parts of documents. In the process of creating new ones, contributing sources leave much behind that will never be expressed on the new canvas. New documents may display the influence of isolated elements of textual sources – a single quote – or they may appropriate some larger manifestation of document design – either an approach, a framing argument, elements of presentation, specific quotations, or any combination of them. Equally, they may reject, omit or deny the influence of any or all of these, including whole documents. Indeed, ‘negative models’, which influence documents’ creation by representing an approach the creators *do not* wish to adopt, are as powerful and as prevalent as those more conventionally considered that inspire emulation.

Underlying all this is the key role played by limits to attention. While it is not quite a zero-sum game, attention is always bounded: it is not infinite. Readers can only attend to so much and can only retain so much: few things can attract focus. This principle applies at the macro- as well as the micro-level. For this limited attention, many documents are competing, and only some will achieve any kind of substantial presence in the minds of their target audience.

Pragmatic dimensions

We have seen that the pathways from consumed to created documents are dominated by a variety of forces and constraints that fragment documents and transform them, and assign particular values to elements within them. These give rise to a series of ‘second order’ phenomena that challenge any remaining assumptions we might entertain about the simplicity of the process.

One important case lies in instances where source documents and their (new) organisational environments exhibit mis-matches. For example, *LBC* frames its propositions on libraries’ value to communities with a specific Victorian governmental policy platform in mind (Oxley 2005, Executive Summary, p.6). This doesn’t translate readily to the Northern Territory, where community-focused policy has a quite different intonation, object, and weighting, and not all Victorian elements find a counterpart in the Territory, by any means. Is, then, *LBC* a blunt instrument in policy process, when the platforms it assumes cannot be located in its translation to ‘foreign soil’?

The answer is quite clearly ‘no’, and for a rather interesting reason. This lack-of-fit has, within the process as a whole, a *generative* effect that is important in its own right, the result of the reader’s move to ‘[fill] in the gaps left by the text’ (Iser 1972, p.285). There are two effects. First, it prompts a scan of what other targets could be identified within existing government policy as points of purchase, thus initiating a more detailed ‘take’ on the political environment. This is an instance of the ‘outward movements’ made by readers, identified above. Second, this apparent obstacle forces a new phase in the ‘use’ of *LBC*, in which it becomes necessary to look at the document within a broader and more abstract perspective: as an *example* of a document written to achieve visibility within government rather than a ready tool to be used with minor adaptations. This change in direction naturally leads to considering other examples and models with rather more attention than they might otherwise have attracted. Thus *LBC*’s ‘presence’ within the policy process assumes an altogether more abstract nature, posing as it does the productive possibility of achieving visibility through alignment with government policy positions stationed at higher – that is, more general – levels of political discourse. In this, the practical fortunes of *LBC* instantiate the often surprising results of selection processes, in which the bulk of the document has been, in effect, set aside, leaving only two higher-order conceptual elements: the broad outlines of a ‘positive model’ of how to seek patronage and support, and a ‘negative model’ of what can go wrong in such an attempt, about which more will be said.

There were similar moments in connection with *Australian Bookstart*. Arguments here voice hopes of Australian federal government intervention, for which there is currently little basis for optimism, as a means to achieve its stated ends. Key elements in the political terrain, particularly structural obstacles, have been overlooked, and the bureaucratic entities suggested are less needed than political strategies to engage government. Again, this left a vacuum and, as before, this was not, ultimately, any kind of disaster: rather the things that documents fail to specify, when there is a reasonable balance of credibility between reader and text, are causes for growth. Under such conditions, readers must inject information to bridge the gap between document and circumstance. This becomes an important part of readers' active participation in the process of making meaning – in this case, responding to the absence of fit with political realities by thinking about what *would* fit, spawning a new cycle of information gathering to be brought to bear, again, on the question to hand.

In fact, this process of growth occurred, in both instances, at a whole series of levels. *Australian Bookstart* makes good arguments in its opening third, but supports them with sources that are either older, or less solid, than would convince people who hold the purse strings. The ensuing outward movement – to fill in better, more current sources – led to an expansion of focus that led all over the world, looking at how people describe literacy's value, and what kind of organisational configurations had arisen to respond to support it. For *LBC*, prominent references to a British document *Framework for the Future* (DCMS 2003) led to a similar outward movement and resulted not only in having this as a constructive basis for comparison, but also filled in a wider context by placing *LBC* against the extensive suite of documents produced under the aegis of the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). In both cases, this resulted in something broader than simply using other sources to confirm or deny assertions. Here were the outlines of a broad discourse that could amplify a sense of *LBC's* project, as well as suggesting alternative means to the same end. These are precursors to a more mature state of research knowledge, in which individual statements and arguments can be assigned to positions within a spectrum.

This sense of context creates a new, better basis to return to the original documents and look, with a wiser eye, at the effectiveness of both their arguments and their design. Here it is useful to invoke a concept of 'fundamentals', which document creators ignore at their peril. For *LBC* there are a number of problems. Layout on the page makes heavy use of out-of-context quotation, and in-text quotes are formatted in grey text boxes, and not introduced – all producing a collage effect which is borrowed from, but surpasses, glossy magazines. The effect is to make it difficult to identify the linear progress, and consequently the validity, of the argument. There are also important limitations in access to the survey material. We read the results of survey data, but it is impossible to judge the validity of the deductive process by going back either to survey questions, responses, or to tabulated results. Data produced by different methodologies – questionnaires, focus groups, interviews – is blended in the body of the report and not having recourse to the separate information streams makes it difficult to verify the conclusions drawn. We are obliged to take the whole thing on trust, thus threatening to undermine a key rationale for the whole exercise, and it makes re-use of the statistical material virtually impossible.

Interestingly, *Australian Bookstart*, a much less 'produced' document that at times simply drops in large sections of text from other sources without much further comment, is a much more transparent document. It openly displays its survey questions and responses to the extent that it has been possible to re-process data and extract further features, verifying and adding to the analysis already performed. In terms of document navigation and flow, the apparently crude three-part design of *Australian Bookstart*, while making it difficult for first-time readers to retain a properly representative image of the document as a whole, ultimately works better. *LBC's* overall structure is overly complex. Its composition as a series of four separate reports means that much of the overarching signposting and structure that would be present to assist a reader to navigate a longer single document is absent. Again, the fragmentary nature of the

result, even down to the nine bibliographies that accompany the text, means that it is a much more difficult document both to assimilate and to assess.

However, to criticise *LBC* is, in itself, an unproductive exercise. It is far more useful to think about how and why it came to be, and what useful deductions can be drawn. *LBC* is an important document, because in it we see a large, well-funded attempt to capture the attention of government, through a particular way of representing what libraries do. This represents an attempt to achieve visibility by establishing consistency with government policy – something that virtually all libraries will need to attempt at some stage in their organisational cycle. The important deduction to be drawn from the *negative* side of the *LBC* project hinges on the risks involved. Things can go wrong when libraries respond too willingly to the siren call of the ‘public relations’ imperative. This is only one part of the equation or, more accurately, one part of the audience. ‘Over-balancing’ in this regard runs the risk of alienating key audiences by removing the intellectual ‘stuffing’ that supports the credibility of documents. For any kind of argument, a fragmented structure often echoes problems with underlying logic, and we might propose a similar relationship between a document’s structure and its ability to envisage and address its audience (Schriver 1997, p.51 ff). In a situation where it clearly intends and needs to address a mixed audience – government, bureaucracy, staff, the public, other libraries – and so to achieve balance between appeals to each of them, *LBC* strains too hard toward some parts of this audience. The result is an attempt to bracket a mis-perceived ‘public’ audience with another comprised of politicians and senior bureaucrats – hence the ‘accessible’ layout and abbreviated levels of evidence – as a means to assert libraries’ ‘relevance’ to public life. In so doing it fails to maintain connection with broader constituencies. In any case, the ‘public’ too needs to feel some sense of evidential support. Without this broader base of interest, government is unlikely to feel any compulsion to raise its level of support, for a blend of interests is the most direct route to the kind of critical mass that prompts government to action.

The significance of all this can best be amplified by returning to the two documents in question, and to the ‘collateral’ documents arising from the outward movement described earlier. Despite their differences, including differences of scale, *LBC* and *Australian Bookstart* both argue for libraries’ value and position in contemporary affairs. One argues that ‘libraries build communities’, while the other sees libraries as central in literacy. In making these arguments, both become part of what I have called a ‘discourse on value’ – the broader conversation about how libraries define their role, understand and affirm the value they deliver, and attract political attention and, consequently, funding. That libraries need to redefine their role and to work to actively expose the value they deliver is plain. This is eloquently argued in the first section of OCLC’s *Environmental Scan*, where there are some less than flattering contrasts drawn between libraries and contemporary web-based services, particularly *Google* (OCLC 2003). In fact, the status of libraries and librarianship, their contribution and funding have been problematic since librarianship became a formal profession in the nineteenth century, and libraries moved, simultaneously, from the private into the public sphere (Carpenter 1998). This is not a problem that will go away: rather, it is an integral part of libraries’ contemporary condition.

Conclusion

What, then, can this discussion of *LBC* and *Australian Bookstart* tell us about the real-life situation in which libraries find themselves? First, that while ‘reporting-up’ and other tools in the visibility palette are clearly necessary, the way it is done involves potential for hazards as well as benefits. Astute political judgements are necessary if documents are to be angled effectively and, as a consequence, constituencies engaged. In talking about cultural value some methods may, however hard we try, under-report in those areas where our real value is strongest and, potentially, distort our vision of our business. The Demos *Valuing Culture*

colloquium (2003) discusses this in detail, shedding light on exactly the kinds of shortcoming evident in *LBC*. Further pursuit of questions raised in this exchange could form the basis for a constructive, open debate about how best to define the contribution and achieve the kind of public presence libraries struggle for.

There is a further thought that serves to underscore the points made thus far. In this we attend to an implied question arising from the discussion of the re-use of a document's data. It might well be objected that re-use is of little import to powerful actors on the library stage, who have other concerns apart from whether smaller players find their productions useful.

However, to give credence to this would be to misunderstand the implications of this paper's argument. Here we have sketched the outlines of a holistic system of document reception and creation made significant by constraints of limited attention: the 'drama of visibility' invoked within the paper. That other players pick and re-use elements from libraries' created documents *is* important because it itself supports, disseminates and promotes the originating library. This kind of attention resonates with and amplifies those manifest in other constituencies, so that this too contributes to the entire, complex store of attention that goes toward achieving visibility. This is, as suggested, ultimately convertible to resources – financial and in kind – from the commonweal. The various audiences for these productions are only in some senses discrete: for in practice, in the wider political arena, their multi-layered interaction is important in making wheels turn, as is the level of attention registering in each.

For libraries, then, effective communication – which is to say, effective *projection* – comes as the result of astutely orchestrated appeals to the multiple audiences that make up their constituency as a whole. Given that many factors are not in control of the creators of these documents, there are two useful directions that can be identified to support this. One is to maintain an effective grasp on the fundamentals of document design. A second, sitting at times in an ambiguous relation to 'fundamentals', is to achieve some openness of plan, allowing different audiences to harvest, with relative ease, the elements pertinent to their particular interests. Without that balance, as we have seen, libraries' documents stand to make a fraction of the impact they might otherwise deliver, prompting concerns for libraries' fortunes within the wider marketplace of attention.

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