2018

What is Documediality and why Traces, Documents and Archives are Normative

Maurizio Ferraris
University of Torino

Valeria Martino
FINO - Northwestern Italian Philosophy Consortium

What is Documediality and why Traces, Documents and Archives are Normative

Abstract

The documedia revolution is a technological, social, and anthropological revolution. It has indeed been possible thanks to the constructive force of documentality in conjunction with the communicative and mobilizing power of the web. It is a connection between documents and media that has involved a very large number of people, in a completely unexpected way. Therefore, it can be defined anthropological because it directly concerns human beings, modifies their lifestyle in more than one way and at the same time highlights some essential human characteristics; it can be considered social because it is given in the social world at the base of which there is documentality; it is technological because it is triggered by the strength and peculiarity of the web.

What is Documediality and why Traces, Documents and Archives are Normative

Maurizio Ferraris and Valeria Martino

1 Documedia Revolution

The documedia revolution is a technological, social, and anthropological revolution. It has indeed been possible thanks to the constructive force of documentality in conjunction with the communicative and mobilizing power of the web. It is a connection between documents and media that has involved a very large number of people, in a completely unexpected way. Therefore, it can be defined anthropological because it directly concerns human beings, modifies their lifestyle in more than one way and at the same time highlights some essential human characteristics; it can be considered social because it is given in the social world at the base of which there is documentality; it is technological because it is triggered by the strength and peculiarity of the web.

However, the documedia revolution does not coincide temporally with the invention of the web and the use of smartphones but it is an event that can be dated back to about fifteen years ago. In fact, this revolution does not consist exclusively in the use of the new technologies but has to do with two elements whose coming to the fore enabled the transformation we are discussing in this paper. The first of these elements consists in the fact that documents are no longer neither deliberate nor rare. Before the documedial revolution, in particular, it was necessary to distinguish between two types of documents: strong

documents and weak documents (Ferraris 2009). The latter indicates something that is not produced with the intention of creating a document but can be used as such at a later time. For example, a muderer does not leave a trace for the purpose of creating a document, but the police, trying to identify him/her, can use his/her traces (fingerprints, i.e. a weak document) as evidence (and therefore as a strong document). The strong document, on the other hand, has very clear and precise rules. Although these rules may be different in relation to the case (if it is a testament or a degree certificate) and in relation to the culture in which the document is produced (in temporally and spatially terms), they have one thing in common: they are codified by the society. To get married, we have to sign an act done in a particular way, have witnesses, and do a whole series of acts identified by the law of the community. However, this does not imply that these rules are subjective: even if they are not natural, but dependent on the subjects, once they are put down in words they become objectively valid. To change them we will need to proceed by following other social and legal rules.

Furthermore, a strong document is the written document *par excellence*. In fact, there is a substantial difference between writing and "arche-writing", another concept, introduced by Derrida, (Derrida 1967). Arche-writing includes rituality, memory, animal traces, technologically recognisable traces (such as DNA), biometric devices, idioms. For this reason, arche-writing precedes but at the same time follows writing: the latter is only a highly codified form of arche-writing. Basically, arche-writing surrounds writing. The latter, as the strong document, is applied within a defined institutional context that involves written acts (although it may include something that looks more like a track, as a fingerprint or a frieze), while arche-writing has more to do with all the social objects and the ritual and mnemonic forms connected to them. Now, with the documedial revolution, this distinction is modified, in the sense that typically written documents (strong documents) are also possible without the knowledge of the subject that produces them. In fact, when we surf the web we produce a large amount of data – the so-called big data – which is a real novelty, because each track is already a strong document, partially

written and coded in part without our consciousness. In other words
the production of documents does not necessarily show a conscious or
deliberate character.

A second feature is the rarity of documents. In the past, it was linked
to the major difficulties that until a few years ago we had to face in order
to produce documents. Now this rarity is replaced by the high number
of objects (and therefore of documents): an economy of overabundance
replaces the economy of novelty. The novelty of a product, of a picture,
of a document, etc. is no longer so important: what interests us is that a
large quantity of them is available. An example of this transformation
is the "machine to translate". It was a dream of the past century that
made us imagine and discuss about the possibilities of an intelligent
technological being able to apply complex human rules, but it has
been achieved through a much simpler, or say trivial, procedure: a very
powerful calculator that performs its calculations on a huge amount of
data. It is the large amount of documents, texts, translations recorded
on the web that has allowed the existence of Google Translator and not
a superfine capacity for judgment. Moreover, this fact reminds us of
the advantages of the ontology of abundance and of exemplarity or of
those ontologies that, instead of trying to reduce the number of objects
as much as possible, prefer to focus on their differentiation (Ferraris
2009). The advantage is not to simplify the reality to such an extent
as to make literary texts indistinguishable from grammars, to give an
example. The apparent disadvantage is to create a disordered archive,
without a catalogue to consult in order to move inside it. Indeed, the
accusation that is brought to these ontologies is that at some point the
process of differentiation has to stop, otherwise it would be impossible
to recognise the same object twice – as the Borges's Funes reminds us
(Borges 1944). Funes thought it was necessary to distinguish the 3.14
p.m. dog seen in profile by the dog of 3.15 p.m. seen from the front,
namely a very difficult and useless process. On the web, however, it
is no longer important to ask where this limit should be placed since
categories and sub-categories are no longer relevant as, in order to find
something, you just have to type its name and a huge archive has an
even more reliable memory than Funes.

The second element that identifies the documedial revolution is the change in the relationship between those who use the media that in turn depends on the change introduced in the media themselves, that is the difference between old and new media. Before the documedial revolution, the relationship was one-many: Hitler could win the elections thanks to his ability to use the radio that implied a single person who speaks and many who listen. However, the new media provide a two-way relationship between the communicator and the receiver: each person is a producer of a message but at the same time receives numerous messages caused or not by his/her own. This creates a much more complex network of relationships. If in the age of communication – the one of the now old media – we could talk about users, namely people who use these media and their products, today we can talk about monads. Individuals, in fact, are more and more single nodes of the network connected to all the other nodes and therefore more individuals. Far from emphasising the relationship alone, eliminating the subject and the object, the web makes subjects even stronger by transforming them into monads aware of their individuality, with a window on the world that allows them to define themselves as individuals.

2 The Documedia Documents

But what kind of documents are those produced during the documedial era? The current one, in fact, is a productive world (although production is not the key element that identifies its specificity) which produces social objects – openly social – and does so with new characteristics.

Indeed, documents are social objects according to the rule made famous in contemporary ontologies by John Searle for which 'an object X counts as Y in context C'. To bring back the classic example, used by Searle himself, a piece of paper with certain characteristics (size, weight, color, watermark, etc.) counts as '5 dollar bill' in the context 'United States of America in the year 1995' (Searle 1995). Social objects, therefore, occupy a place in space and time, like natural objects (i.e. a lion, a mountain, a sapphire) but, unlike the latter, depend on the

subjects. Social objects exist only to the extent that men and women think that they exist: it makes no sense to talk about mortgage or president on a desert island. Thus one can arrive at a further rule which consists of the formula 'Object = Recorded Act' (Ferraris 2009). This rule means that every social object is an inscription on any physical medium, from marble to neurons (the paper on which the amount of my mortgage is written or the physical man or woman declared president), which occurs through the recording of acts that involves at least two people (a promise never enunciated is not a promise, but a fantasy of mine that no one can accuse me of not having respected. The rule is of the kind 'Unus testis, nullus testis'). With this simple rule it is possible to explain the social world and also its transformations, including the one we are witnessing. It is specifically the weak or extensive way of the rule – that is the one expressed by the concept of arche-writing – that allows the constitution of the social world. The huge mass of data, in fact, is intended as a huge proliferation of documents, registrations, and inscriptions of the most diverse objects on and through the web where the web plays the role of the support and at the same time guarantees that no island is a desert. Starting from this, it is possible to understand the revolutionary scope of documents in contemporary society, which makes it the epoch of documediality.

The characteristics that identify documediality, which become characteristics of the documents produced and conveyed in this era, can be listed as follows: virality, persistence, mystification, fragmentation, and opacity (Ferraris 2017). In fact, the web, in addition to allowing the proliferation (in quantity and usability) of the documents, also makes them easily diffused. Consequently and without difficulty, any news can become viral: its diffusion does not need complicated ways of transmission. If the virality is typical of some very precise and determined times, for example the times of war in which fear and prejudice towards the enemy cause (fake) news to be amplified and spread, sometimes even independently in different countries (Bloch 1921), today this is the norm. It always happens, without the need for special conditions. It is the web itself that constitutes this condition, both through the speed of reproduction and through the exponential

multiplication of the sources. The persistence of the news lies in their being disconnected from a precise date of publication: the news floats on the web out of time, determining temporal loops that give the impression of a repetition of the news due to its numerous occurrences. The web, therefore, makes it very easy to mystify a piece of news (for example, by making usual a thing that happened only once, repeating it several times), but also for example a profile, through pseudonyms and anonymity. If in the past such characteristics cast doubtful light on the way news was produced, today pseudonyms and anonymity seem to enjoy a much more favorable light. All this implies an accentuation of fragmentation and opacity, where the first characteristic is favored by the same quantity of sources as well as by often partial interests of the users; while the opacity is also due to the types of relationships that take place on the web. These in fact undermine the idea of authoritativeness and responsibility, transforming the web into the world of 'they say'.

Thus, documediality is a candidate for being the epistemological, ontological, and technological absolute (in the etymological sense of *ab-solutus*, i.e. free from any constraint) of our age: it is an absolute knowledge, power, and duty. In fact, the web knows everything about the world and about ourselves, knowing perfectly our habits – from websites that we usually consult to the words we use to compose sentences or to the music we like. It is an absolute power because there is no power without the web and at the same time the web contributes enormously by allowing it to be disseminated and taken over, for example, by the use of social networks by politicians or influential personalities. It is the absolute duty as the mobilization it entails and the normativity it embodies clearly show.

3 And then?

But in order to understand the normativity of the documedia age, we must take a step back: to specify it we must contextualise it.

The documedia age, as revolutionary, certainly represents an important change, an upsetting of different aspects, hitherto undervalued or misunderstood. However, making this change a

revolution also implies inserting it into a historical context that, as such, includes previous phases. We can therefore identify three historical phases: production, communication, and recording to which correspond three epochs, i.e. capitalism, mediality, and documediality. In turn, these three epochs are just as manifestation of documentality. The latter is at the base of all three historical forms. Indeed, documentality is a necessary and sufficient condition of society. Without documents there could not be a society, as on the other hand the opposite is true: there cannot exist a document outside the society that interprets it as such. This is also why the interpretation of society as a great archive is worthwhile. As a result, documediality does not represent the end of documentality: it is rather its extreme form.

Therefore, in the documedia period the basic rules of society and of documentality are the same but their application no longer occurs through the classic categories, which consequently are no longer enough to interpret it. We need a method that highlights the key aspects of the documedia era, that is, the era in which we live, and allows us to distinguish it from the other two. These aspects can be summarised in a scheme. First of all, on the basis of their products and the activities that are used to produce them, it is possible to distinguish the three epochs as follows:

Capitalism/ Manufactory (production)	Mediality (communication)	Documediality (recording)
Commodity	Spectacle	Social Object
Labour	Consumerism	Mobilisation

Hence, the three epochs have as their characteristic element a different way of manifesting themselves: capitalism/manufactory manifests itself through production, mediality through communication, and documediality through recording. The recording, which intervenes to fix the object and to codify it in a way that is transposable, is the key element of documediality; it acquires such an important role that it becomes absolutely central: it becomes a mass recording – not

necessarily aimed at communicating something to someone because the web will think about it. This implies a different productive result (of course, all three things are produced in all three eras but their respective relevance changes): in the first case there is an attention to the production of commodities, in the second of spectacles, in the third of social objects. Let us say again, a social object is a product of society that includes different types of things from the testament to the professor's office, from economic crises to oaths. All these social objects are united by their objectivity even though they depend on the existence of subjects. Every search, every message, every published selfie becomes a document, i.e. a written act, and so the work itself (or the production methods) is transformed into production of documents. This has also led to a change in the distinction between work time and free time. On the one hand, the technological devices allow us to devote time to our private life while working, but on the other making us always reachable they make us feel obliged to answer (to the boss, to the colleagues, to e-mails etc.) even in typical free moments, at night, on Sundays, during the holidays. Therefore, instead of the labour of the era of manufactory and of the consumerism of the era of communication, during the period of the recording, we have mobilization – which in addition to providing an anthropological clarification, becomes itself a labour and a consumerism of one's own time.

4 The documedia normativity

The normativity of documediality is therefore understood through the mobilization that the web, and the technological apparatuses in general, impose on us: a total mobilization that on the one hand reveals our true nature, on the other involves significant socio-economic changes, first of all the transformation of the work (Ferraris 2015). What the mobilization reveals is that human beings are intrinsically in need of technology. Something that we already know from the enigma that the sphinx poses to Oedipus: 'Who is simultaneously biped, tripede and quadruped?'. The answer, as is well known, is the 'human being' whose third age is constituted by being tripede, that is by walking through

the use of the stick. Without technological elements, of whatever type they are, from the mobile phone, to the stick to the peacemaker, the human being is an imbecile, in the etymological sense of the word, namely he/she is a defective being (Ferraris 2016). Therefore, the mobilization of the web with the fashions connected to it, such as that of taking photographs of what we are eating or of posting numerous selfies, does not represent a degeneration of society; it rather highlights some characteristics of human beings that simply technological means and their diffusion can bring out: an original technological lack and an original life in society devoted to self-affirmation, to the need of recognition by others (I am seen so I am) and aware of the imperative 'express yourself, be yourself'. Documediality reveals the supporting structures of social reality and the ways in which changes are possible.

But who are those who are mobilized? And why do they suffer or accept this mobilization if they do so without obtaining any profit in return (as well as it happens on social networks)? They do it because documediality is inherently normative. It has a responsible function; it generates intentionality and even moral anxiety: we are called to 'respond to', respond to an appeal that the web addresses to us, and only to us, and that we cannot ignore. This is a much stronger mobilization, only apparently less invasive, than that of the last century.

Thus, we can continue the schematisation of the categories that identify the three epochs (based on activities, modalities, and subjects) as follows:

Capitalism/ Manufactory (production)	**Mediality** (communication)	**Documediality** (recording)
Sustenance	Compensation	Recognition
Alienation	Distraction	Self-affirmation
Classes	Users	Monads

If labour has the purpose of sustenance and consumerism that of compensation, in the case of mobilisation what we seek is recognition – a recognition that becomes a real job, as it occupies a non-negligible

part of our lives and a compensation of time spent, even if mostly for free. The compensation lies in the recognition that mobilizes us. All the time spent on the web does not create alienation or distraction, as many critics argue (but every age and every technology has its critics who see in the novelty the end of true values and the conveyance of disvalues). Rather, this mobilizing system produces self-affirmation – an assertion that no longer represents the distraction connected to old media as a form of *divertissement* that acts as a veil in order to cover important things (the web instead of television instead of fox hunting). In this way, in relation to what we said at the beginning of this paper, we have a transformation of the subjects themselves (summarised in the last row of the table): the classes, united by a common socio-economical element, transformed into users, united by the spectacle they enjoy individually, become monads: individuals who assert themselves on the web and incessantly produce documents.

References

Bloch M 1921 'Reflections of a Historian on the False News of the War' Trans J P Holoka in *Michigan War Studies Review* 2013/051

Borges J L 1993 *Ficciones* Everyman London (originally published 1944)

Derrida J 1998 *Of Grammatology* Johns Hopkins University Press Baltimore (originally published 1967)

Ferraris M 2012 *Documentality: Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces* Fordham University Press New York (originally published 2009)

2015 *Mobilitazione Totale* Laterza Roma-Bari

2016 *L'imbecillità è una cosa seria* il Mulino Bologna

2017 *Postverità e altri enigmi* il Mulino Bologna

Searle J R 1995 *The Construction of Social Reality* The Free Press New York