



Preface

The forms that documentary work assumes are as numerous as the needs from which they are born.

—Suzanne Briet, *What Is Documentation?*

Suzanne Briet (1894–1989) was an important European Documentalist, constituting what we may term the second generation of European Documentation. If the first generation may be thought of in terms of the work of the founder of European Documentation, Paul Otlet (1868–1944), then the second generation might be thought of in terms of the work of Suzanne Briet, and in particular, her small but important book, *What Is Documentation?* *What Is Documentation?* is a revolutionary book in the field of library studies, and it goes beyond Otlet's emphasis on the book as the trope and cornerstone for documentation. It offers a vision beyond that of libraries and books, seeing in documentation an unlimited horizon of physical forms and aesthetic formats for documents and an unlimited horizon of techniques and technologies (and of "documentary agencies" employing these) in the service of multitudes of particular cultures. In these regards, Briet's manifesto remains a "necessity for our time."

European Documentation was an important, but largely forgotten, movement bridging librarianship and what would become information science in the first half of the twentieth century. Though it was a professional movement,

in the work of Otlet and Briet it was situated within the pressing concerns of its day: internationalization, standardization, documentary overload, coordinating and encouraging scholarly communication, and not least of all world peace (in Otlet) and international development (in Briet). In each of their works, consideration of not only the social orders in which documentation takes place, but also the *cultural forms and conditions for agency* of documentation, plays a central role. In contrast to the collection ethos and tradition of European librarianship, particularly before the Second World War, European documentation stressed services to the users within the contexts of cultural and intellectual expression and of social development. In contrast to librarianship on both sides of the Atlantic, documentation encouraged and foresaw the use of new technologies and new media in the delivery and production of information and knowledge. It emphasized the multiple physical forms and formats of documents and the importance of interlinking those forms through intermediary representations. In both Otlet's and Briet's works there is not only the embracing of new technologies, but also the celebration of such, and the desire to see the merging of human techniques and technologies in larger harmonies. Allied with, but going beyond, American Documentation on the one hand, and beyond American special librarianship on the other, European Documentation saw the integration of *technology* and *technique* (both may be rendered by the French word *technique*) within social development and cultural forms as the way forward. For all these reasons, European Documentation remains quintessentially a *modernist* phenomenon, one whose importance continues to this day, as we are still concerned with problems of documentary internationalization, standardization, technological and documentary convergence, documentary overload, scholarly communication, and the integration of technology, culture, and society across the globe. All those who have worked on the present translation and accompanying materials in this book have felt that it is imperative that Suzanne Briet's small book—really, a professional and cultural manifesto—be made available to readers of English.

Briet's *What Is Documentation?* originally appeared in 1951 from a small professional press, ÉDIT (Éditions Documentaires Industrielles et Techniques), which was a publishing arm of the Union Française des Organismes de Documentation (UFOD), of which Briet was a founding member. Out of negotiations between the now defunct UFOD and the Conservatoire national des Arts et Métiers (CNAM) came Briet's educational institution for documentation, the Institut national des techniques de la documentation (INTD), which still exists today and is located in CNAM. Briet's book appeared in a small printing and it sometimes reads as if it had little proofreading. Further, the printing is rather rough at points, with the chart at the end

of the first chapter, in particular, being difficult to read because of awkward typographical alignments.

The book begins with the problem of defining documentation, which Briet does, as she explains, with the help of linguists and philosophers. Here, in the first of the three chapters ("A Technique of Intellectual Work"), Briet develops her notions of the concept and profession of documentation. Briet views documentation as a "cultural technique" that addresses the needs of contemporary culture at large and, most importantly, the needs of individual cultures of scientific disciplines and scholarly production, for the rapid and efficient delivery of documents toward scientific (and scholarly) advancement. In this latter role, the documentalist is attuned to particular cultures of research and production and to "prospecting" at the edge of and beyond those cultures for the benefit of researchers. What is important are the social networks and cultural forms that construct the meaning and value of documents. Within these networks and forms the documentalist locates—"orients"—him- or herself, though also in relation to neighboring networks and forms and in attunement to the demands of culture as a whole at a given time. The second chapter, "A Distinct Profession," lays out the professional specificity of documentation, particularly in regard to the traditional European librarianship of Briet's day, and it specifies the particular technologies and educational requirements that are needed in order to produce documentalists. For Briet, documentation surpasses librarianship by its attention to multiple forms and formats for documents and by a widened array of techniques to handle these. Documentary forms are becoming increasingly fragmentary, in contrast to the previous historical dominance of the book, and they are becoming recombined through standardized intermediaries. What is also striking—and of special importance for us, today—in this chapter is Briet's statement at one point that documentary forms are increasingly taking the shape of "substitutes for lived experiences"—that is, representational forms that assume the illusion of lived experience itself (film, photographs, etc.—echoing, but extending, earlier commentary in the twentieth century by Walter Benjamin and many others) and that these are being increasingly coordinated by abstract, standardized techniques toward a "*collectivization of knowledge and ideas*." These two aspects of documentary technique have, as Briet notes, consequences not only for professionals, but also for society at large. The last chapter, "A Necessity for Our Time," sums up the first two chapters and expands on the importance of documentation to society and culture in terms of international cooperation, emphasizing the work of the United Nations and UNESCO as important leadership organizations in world development. For Briet, documentation follows in the "wake" of the United Nations vessel, bringing development across the globe.

Professional activities, for Briet, can only be viable given an understanding of social and cultural space—and “culture” must be understood not just in terms of the sociology of production within individual scientific and scholarly disciplines, but also in regard to larger cultural, social, and historical horizons within which these disciplines, as well as documentation, may find or imagine itself. What Briet identifies as the failures of librarianship (and which her work in founding the reference room at the Bibliothèque nationale worked against) lies in its professional negligence for proactive engagement with, and on behalf of, these different cultures. For Briet, documentation is not only “dynamic,” but it is also a dynamism of “*prospection*” (“research,” or literally as our translation has rendered it, “prospecting”). Documentation, as Briet puts it elsewhere, must be like the “dog on the hunt,” sniffing out new knowledge within and at the boundaries of established networks, resources, and materials, especially in fast-moving fields of research. And in doing so, it not only acknowledges, but also fits with, the new “rhythms” of production made possible by technology, which Briet understands as efficient and expansive.

These and other theoretical observations regarding documentation’s relation to culture make Briet’s book of value not only to Library and Information Studies, but also to cultural studies, rhetoric, and science and technology studies. The rhetorical and theoretical brilliance that characterize Briet’s book have, perhaps, never been replicated in library and information publications and have rarely been seen in professional texts of any type. Not again—until Actor Network Theory at the end of the twentieth century—would a social network account of technical production, and specifically, documentary production, be articulated. Briet’s comprehension of the integration of technology and technique, of machines and culture, is something that we still strive to understand in both Library and Information Studies and in science and technology studies. In terms of education and scholarship, there remains a large gulf between prescriptive, professional education and the study of larger cultural concerns, traditionally engaged in the liberal arts. Briet, however, points to the necessity of understanding and taking measure of the cultural categories, the historical lineages, and the social forces that produce, support, and continue a profession. She demands that documentalists be proficient in two foreign languages, that they consider the position of their work within a cultural specialty and within culture and society as a whole, that their orientation and specialized vocabularies originate from the cultural specialization which they serve, and that they see documents as assuming varieties of physical forms and formats. Briet believes that documentalists have as part of their mandate exploring at, and beyond, the boundaries

of their cultural specialization. In these assertions, she challenges the education of library and information professionals in her day and in our own.

Thus, Briet’s book points in many directions: it advocates on behalf of European documentation against the traditional boundaries and foci of librarianship and the education of library professionals, it engages in cultural analysis and critique, and it marks and foresees the transition from the culture of the book to the culture of documents in multiple forms and formats. It appears to simply be a professional manifesto, but it is so much more, and it is worth repeated readings for its complexity and subtlety. It is not only an important book of the past, but it is also an important book for the present and the future.

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