

Information, communication and anthropology of knowledge

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Abstract

In Lille, ICS (Information and Communication Sciences) research revolves around the concept of anthropology of knowledge, and is strongly supported by textual sciences. Since the bond between communication and information was a core concern, the ideas of “text” or “enunciation” were used with a very broad meaning, according to a pragmatic approach that takes into consideration semiotic, social and technical contexts. At this moment of widespread computerization, researchers become more centered on evolutionary rather than mediatic principles, always reaching new levels and acquiring new shapes. It is about studying the constitution, circulation and appropriation of knowledge under a perspective that is both systemic and phenomenologic.

Keywords

document; semiopragmatic; dirscursive formation; social representation; usage

Introduction

It was around the 1980's that professor Gérard Losfeld had the initiative of forming our team in Lille, based on the original concept of “anthropology of knowledge”. This concept has grown ever since, without ever losing its initial purpose. It is currently known as IDS (Information and Documentation Sciences), and it “revolves around the issues of production, modeling, dissemination and appropriation of knowledge, with regards to the forms, techniques, and contexts that participate in its socialization. This issue is approached at its semiotic, material and technical, cognitive, social and economic levels”(extract from the official presentation text).

The cross-disciplinary characteristic of these guidelines, which has been present since the beginning, was

confirmed by our insertion in the GERIICO laboratory (Group for Interdisciplinary Research and Study on Information and Communication). The name of the laboratory points toward the fact that to us, communication is closely linked to information (BEGUIN et al., 2007). However, we insisted on highlighting through the name adopted by our team (Information and Documentation Sciences) the specificity of our research field: documents and documentation.

This paper does not intend to be objective, or even representative of a collective doctrine. Rather, its goal is to present a retroactive and necessarily subjective outlook on cross-disciplinarity, as we experienced in Lille: What concepts are fundamental to us? Which disciplines, or even fields, do we refer to? How do we transform them,

incorporating them into the field of ICS (Information and Communication Sciences)? Which new research trends were we able to approach?

Textual sciences: a solid base

In France, countless researchers of the ICS received initial education in literature (TETU, 2002). It comes as no surprise, under such conditions, that the ideas of “text” and “discourse” have been the central subject of many discussions. ICS are characterized by an approach that favors the processes of mediation, transformation, and appropriation of information delivered by the texts concerning the esthetic appreciation that the latter can create. The very definition of “text” can be expanded into reference forms and domains that are not considered by literary analysis or by classic linguistics. Communication about or by means of texts is considered as a social phenomenon: text-objects are part of “intertextual” networks and inserted in a “context” that includes actors, institutions, and reference culture. The text is the element of a complex system, closely related to the circulation of knowledge and to the construction of knowledge.

A broader definition of the “text” concept

Oswald Ducrot and Jean-Marie Shaeffer define text as a “semiotic unit defined by its independency and self-containment”. At the same time, they say it is characterized as “an empirical object and a complex heterogeneous unit”. This definition has one advantage: it does not limit the definition of text to a linguistic approach. On the contrary, it allows us to extend it into the dimension of graphics (pictures, typography), or even computers (links, hypertexts).

Such non-linguistic openness to signs is beneficial to the ICS, which are interested in other forms of communication beyond literature. In the literary domain, it allows us to interpret dealing with editorial policies, and is of special interest to the world of libraries. Said openness is quite functional in the digital domain for analyzing multimedia “texts” for the dissemination of knowledge: written segments, still or motion pictures, schematic elements, sounds... become more and more intertwined as they are updated by the reader by means of hypertext links. The latter acts upon the signs according to its project. For new texts, new readings and consequently new research objects appropriated by ICS (BEGUIN, 2006).

To a certain extent, ICS go back to the origins of semiotics, which Saussure defined as “the life of signs in social life”, prior to the dominant role of linguistics in the research of Human Sciences that systematically started to favor the “language” dimension of communications.

Other concepts, similar to that of “text”, are reexamined by the ICS with equivalent extension: that is what occurs, for instance, with the “enunciation” concept. Emmanuel Souchier introduced the concept of “editorial enunciation” (SOUCHIER, 1998) and I considered myself the documental offer of a library as a process of enunciation (BEGUIN, 2002).

Broadly speaking, the concepts added to textual sciences by the ICS allow us to perceive the systematic and complex characteristic of communications and its social counterpart. Researchers utilize theories of speech and enunciation much more than those of language and code. Additionally, the utilization of these concepts provides them with a more comprehensive understanding, rather than a logocentered one.

Rules of reception

The analysis of communicational objects, however, is only a segment within the project of the ICS that approaches communications and their dynamics of communicational processes. In order to perceive communications that are related to the document, the main contributions are related to the theories of reception (Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Umberto Eco) and to the so called “pragmatic” approaches

Charles Morris (1938) identifies three domains in the comprehension of every language: the syntactic component, concerning the “grammar” of signs; the semantic component, which refers to the relationship between signs and reality (the referential); and the pragmatic component, which relates to the relationship of signs and their users, their utilization and effects. ICS researchers felt more attracted towards the third component.

Our interest in the ICS lies in the construction of knowledge based on the symbolic treatment of information, be it verbal, iconic, or sound-related. The relationship between the knowledge that one attempts to transmit and that actually constructed lies at the core of this discussion. By way of exemplification, how does the user of a resource center acquire information? What is reading? What determines the “act” of reading? If knowledge is structured and disseminated by documents, and if the purpose is to ensure the best possible sharing of such knowledge, one should assess the degree of cooperation that the reader must show towards the reading of such documents.

“Pragmatics” is a theory that intends to grasp the process of reading induced by a text and its impact on the reader. It strongly reinstates studies about “lisibility”, as it allows us to infer both a performance executed and a dysfunctionality of the reading. After all, it places great importance on the idea of context: reading, in fact, relies on the inferential activity of the reader based on the signs of the text, as well as on the information they have already memorized and on the material and social context of the reading. This approach to communication is not limited to the message alone; it is, rather, a systemic outlook. Many of the ICS studies currently support this “pragmatic” trend where we fit.

The contribution of cognitive sciences and social psychology

In order to explain the comprehension of texts, the more classic pragmatic approach is based on textual forms that are based on the principle that they are, in and of themselves, bearers of prospective effects within

the environment of a given culture. However, in order to infer processes related to reading and the acquisition of knowledge, the researcher is led towards a discussion about the reader's intelligence: their ability to infer, to abstract, and even their "cognitive style". Elements taken from cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics allow us to better explain the phenomena of elaboration of meaning, and to assess mediations applied to knowledge, especially documentary mediation (indexation, characterization, classification). In semiotics, this interdisciplinary procedure is especially found in Umberto Eco's work (1997).

Up to this point the ICS have not demonstrated receptiveness towards these research fields. The works of Jean-Pierre Meunier and Daniel Peraya are exceptions. This component is strongly present in my own work, hence it is mentioned here. I studied, thus, the function of graphic models in reading. I found support in papers that approach perception and the relationship between perception and semiosis (BEGUIN 2006). I also developed a whole set of observations about the on-screen simulation of scientific experiments (BEGUIN, 2001). In both cases semiotics allowed me to describe the organization of signs, but in order to model the usage of such "devices"¹, subsidies found in the works of psychology of perception and action on memory and attention games, the "incorporated" knowledge, the establishment of routines are much more useful.

How can we explain the marginal characteristic of these features borrowed from cognitive psychology in the ICS? A double explanation is possible: These are oftentimes experimental studies, and therefore out of context, whereas the ICS attempt to perceive communications "within a context". On the other hand, these studies take interest on the individual outside his or her social environment, whereas the ICS put social aspects in a central position.

ICS researchers – even more focused on social psychology, which concerns specifically the phenomena of social interactions among groups and individuals – have shown preference for the concept of "social representation" over that of "cognitive representation". These two concepts, however, are not mutually exclusive, since the former has an "encompassing" characteristic with regards to the latter, and can be used as its "armor", as it were.

Serge Moscovici defines social representation as an "organized corpus of knowledge and one of the psychic activities that have enabled man to make physical and social reality intelligible, to establish and participate in a group or relationships of daily exchange, and to unleash the power of imagination.

In a community, social representations are carried out by means of shared pictures and vocabularies, and facilitate communication. They are not about normative and uniform representations, but rather "negotiated" representations upon which one can project themselves according to their past, their environment, their belonging to different groups. Concerning the acquisition of knowledge, social representations play the role of a filter

(GIORDAN, 1994). It is, therefore, through the study of social representations that the social play of communications is put into evidence. The emphasis applied to communication concerns the ICS, and it is probably here that the most important interface between the ICS and psychology lies.

The necessary seizure of materialities

According to our unique perspective, the ICS are located in a cross-disciplinary intersection where textual sciences meet social sciences around the core issue of the dissemination of knowledge. The fundamental importance of certain concepts walks hand in hand with the selection of methods. We have always pursued the idea that, in order to get rid of the local ideology, the researcher needs to be supported by "observables", that is, by the describable material elements that play a role in the communications. For instance, the idea that the information conveyed by a computerized system could be "dematerialized" is a lie, in that it only exists by means of "formalization", simultaneously in a technical system and through a graphic interface. Under these circumstances, the unstable and uncertain characteristic of the appearances with which information is coated is but one of the effects of the technical and semiotic system that is used to disseminate it. The influence of Yves Jeanneret (2000) on our team was decisive for the definition of such role. It led us to revitalize the idea of "document" in that it allows us to consider the material, as well as social and technical dimension of information.

Information and document

Whether we consider the social and collective or the individual aspect, it is not possible to talk about information without connecting it to operations acting on human understanding. This would be my definition: "a piece of information is data that make sense to somebody".

Information in itself has no palpable characteristic. It cannot be observed outside its verbalization or without its being inserted in a support. Hence the importance that we assign, in a research environment, to the idea of "document". A document is an object that contains information with the purpose of disseminating it. Communication is the fundamental idea. Likewise, a document contains information and the labels of communication it is comprised of. A document is something that is kept as a proof, that enables information to become real and someone to witness its existence. The legal idea of "proof" is connected to referentiation. The references of a document are indications about its production context (person in charge, place, date). They make the nature of the treatment of the information contained in the document perceptible, and therefore liable to falsification. It is associated to the legal concept of liability and intellectual property.

Therefore, the materiality of a document makes it observable in several levels: the nature of its support and of the forms of inscription that comprise it, as well as its execution, filing and circulation conditions. Its object-like

nature crystallizes a set of clues that disclose the statute of the information it conveys in the society that utilizes it. The documental form has a close relationship with the qualification of the texts.

At this level, the works of Roger Chartier about the history of readings enabled us to restore the link between historical studies and the study of contemporary media, thus paving the way for method transfers. Data can only become information when it is grounded both at the semiotic and social-technical levels. This is how Susan Kovacs (2006), emphasized, by means of a historical approach about the relationship between text and image of older pedagogic works, the structuring role of forms in the mediation of knowledge, and the relationship between their selection and underlying pedagogic ideologies.

Importance of the technical dimension

The history of book shows us how much its object-like nature has been a determinant of its reading modes: From *volume* to *codex*, from manuscript to the printed version. This technical dimension of a document conveying information becomes even more complex with the computerization of texts. Yves Jeanneret has specially demonstrated, by developing the concept of “architext”, how much computerized systems and certain software made available by recent technology could play the role of intellectual matrixes, in that they set the boundaries of the documental form taken by information as they define guidelines for the reading and informational behavior. Is the googelization of informational practices not a common talk nowadays? (DESPRES-LONNET & COURTECUISSÉ, 2006).

Therefore, we consider the technical dimension of informational phenomena to be an important principle, since the technique encourages behaviors that may become a social dimension. It is, however, from a pragmatic standpoint and due to its influence on the reception of information in a social context that we consider this technical dimension, connected to the semiotic and material dimensions. Here we insist on differentiating ourselves clearly from surveys in the field of engineering sciences, which are completely biased towards technical infrastructures.

Therefore, in her eligibility essay: *On the media at work*, Dominique Cotte examines how documental tools bear the characteristic of man’s relationship with his working environment, and simultaneously contribute to the shaping of such environment. her approach is both anthropological and phenomenological, in that the author analyzes the permanent interactions between material forms and social practices of a world dedicated to the effectiveness of actions.

“Practice” and “usage”: an anthropological approach

The attention given to material and social contexts has allowed us to account for the expression “anthropology of knowledge”, which we consider to be a founder.

Documentary traces are both signs of the permanent intellectual elaboration of knowledge in a social group and of power relations, of more or less explicit struggles, and of influences connected to the circulation of knowledge. This is what led us to develop the concept of “usage” against the concept of “practice”, borrowed from sociology.

Practices are socially established, long-lasting behaviors, and revealing of a culture (PERRIAULT et al., 2004). Similarly to “practice”, “utilization” implies a temporal dimension, a form of habit (*custom and usage*), but mainly and fundamentally it implies the relationship with an object (*make use of, abuse, use, useful*). I would define usage as a behavior concerning objects. Similarly to what occurs in the case of practices, this definition implies a social and cultural dimension, but it also implies a technical dimension of relationship with the object. In other words, usages are ingrained in practices, but in order to analyze usage it is necessary to specifically consider the encounter of a subject with objects. The analysis of usages meets social dimension when statistic values are made evident.

In order to approach this concept of usage within the sphere of information technologies, Joëlle Le Marec deeply influenced our approaches (LE MAREC, 2001). It refers to showing evidence, by means of observation, of practices (in the sense given by Michael De Certeau) adopted by individuals to adapt themselves to regulated devices, even if it is to bypass or adapt them. The researcher is therefore led to observe personal documentary organizations, hints of doubts, and the rewriting and redocumentalization of information.

Thus, it assumes the existence of a qualitative survey, comprised of interviews and field observations to calculate the distance between the representations of the several actors involved and the reality of effective practices (BEGUIN, 2006). Therefore, within the sphere of a survey denominated “Informational culture and documentary *curriculum*” we observed how documents were produced, organized and transmitted at the level of the educational community of a school group: Teachers, students and parents. This in-depth case study allowed us to demonstrate the existence of a discrepancy: on the one hand, teachers would provide us with a prescriptive speech throughout the interviews, regulated in practices that are, or are considered to be, specialized. On the other hand, we would see evidence of non-formalized, multiform usages, adapted to the local issues, but also likely to explain, through their heterogeneity, difficulties in the organization of knowledge.

We were also led to develop specific techniques for the observation of multimedia products or websites. Therefore Luis-François Claro conceived a video tracking system invisible to the user, which enables simultaneously recording, in the same media, their actions on-screen and their physical actions at the workplace. Such a device enables one to carry out, for instance, a fine analysis of the difficulties of students concerning digital information.

To the extent that this approach attempts to be contextual, systemic, aware of actors and of the traces of action with its relations with the local culture of the observed, we could qualify it as being “ethnographical”.

The social circulation of speeches

With the temporal recoil, the ICS present a new type of issue: questioning the evolution of media and practices, the mutations of these materialities we have just mentioned, semiotic variations, mediatic metamorphoses... the development of new informational media makes these phenomena become more sensitive, as they accelerate them: Information can easily change its support, subsidies, transfers and reappropriations are facilitated, documentary forms merge, cultural repertoires intertwine. This brings about an in-depth transformation of the relationship with knowledge, to the point of shaking educational institutions, from school to university. How should one consider these dynamics that transform our society? In order to get to this point, the concepts of text, document or usage must be analyzed under broader perspectives, both in space and time.

Mediatic transfers, intertextuality and genres

The concept of “intertext” originated in the textual sciences. Gérard Genette (GENETTE, 1982: I, p. 7-14) defines it as the implicit or explicit co-presence of a text in another text. It is often associated to the concept of “dialogism”, introduced by Mikhail Bakhtine: a text is always the product of the several voices that model it and bind it to previous textual sets. The work of Antoine Compagnon (COMPAGNON, 1979) about “quotation” follows in the same direction: a text is an arrangement of what has been said. In the presence of a “third reader” the author of a quotation assigns a role to the speech of that which is quoted, and reappropriates it.

With the appearance of digital media, the practices of quotation, juxtaposition, reappropriation, rewriting... gained a new momentum. The technical and material facilities associated to text and image manipulation have considerably broadened the social outreach of these resources: editorial formatting and availability to the public were made more easily accessible. Whether one considers sounds, pictures or texts, the digital nature of information and the large amount of certain software tools, including adapted² versions, facilitates transfers between media. Additionally, it makes them predictable, thus modifying the audience’s expectations. It is this social dimension of the phenomenon that interests the ICS. The now broader concept of “intertextuality” concerns all “texts” and all media.

Thus, Laure Bolka (2007), who defended the thesis *Elements for a semiopragmatic analysis of multisupport transfer of televisual image* The case of “telereality” images on the internet and on the magazines about mediatic transfers between television, the press, and the Internet. Side by side with classical exchanges among institutions (from one channel to another, from one show to the corresponding site or to sites dedicated to critical reviews), it highlighted, in

association with the use of the computer and networks, an extension of the practices of quotation, compilation, exchange or rewriting of televisual images, especially when related to teenagers who watch the reality shows. Due to the demand they generate, such practices have impact on the show schedule itself.

Documentary forms are activated by this transmediatic circulation, generating crossbreeding and the appearance of new “mixed” objects: for instance, the website of the *Le Monde* newspaper now offers multimedia products that complement information printed on the paper, and includes a section called “Focus”, completely based on visual synthesis of texts and images of very heterogeneous nature (maps, diagrams, photographs, drawings...) (BEGUIN, 2007).

The idea of genre and the evolution of repertoires

Transfers concern both specific contents and forms that organize the media: if in the 1990’s the growth of informatics among the general public revolved around interfaces that lent metaphoric meaning to the universe of paper, currently the influence of digital devices is omnipresent in the universe of book, press, and television. It comes along with several transmissions and exchanges between different types of media. Such phenomena necessarily induce new forms of reading, an evolving relationship with knowledge that transforms itself and, in this process, transforms communications and the power relations in the society where we live.

The idea of “genre”, borrowed from literature, rejected by structuralists due to its heterogeneity finds new meaning here. “Genres” are classes of speech uniquely identifiable, within a given social and cultural context, under the implicit acquiescence of readers. Criteria for the classification of genres are both thematic and formal. They are also variable in space and time, and are subject to criteria of cultural legitimacy. The concept of “genre”, however, has the advantage of binding the universe of texts to their social and communicational context. The set of genres subject to identification in a given culture comprises the expected timeline for receiving the documents. They comprise a repertoire of forms subject to a perpetual readjustment that conditions the interpretation of readings, while being defined by it.

For the ISC, the appearance and transformation of mediatic genres in their social, cultural and economic context provides a rich research object.

The idea of “discursive formation”: modelling the game of powers

The philosopher Michael Foucault (1969) defines history as the way a given society “gives meaning and defines the elaboration” of the “file”, that is, a “documentary mass that cannot be differentiated from the society”. The production of knowledge executes a continuous work on which was previously produced: It is necessary to demarcate, reorder, suture... in short, to create order in the circulating speech. These cut-downs

and reconfigurations are themselves facts of speech that deserve to be analyzed, since they represent categories of thought of a given time, principles of classification, regulations and genres that develop therein.

Many ICS researchers are involved in this project, around the concept of “discursive formation” that Foucault defines as a configuration of speeches, characterized by common subjects, institutions and references, whose sharing, circulation and transformation are guided by rules, and effort is needed in setting them out.

The regulation of discursive formation is a power procedure that is symbolic, and also political and economical. Given the growing importance of the Internet in the operation of different media, how are common-interest communities formed? How are antagonisms managed? How is the “documentary mass” of the file redesigned within a context of culture industrialization? These issues were exhaustively discussed by our team (BÉGUIN et al., 2007).

I will especially mention the works of Jean-Stéphane Cernel, who finished his thesis on the recycling of images in television news. He shows that the rate of reutilization of images is much greater than one could expect. Images are privileged due to economic criteria, or to the organization of the work of the journalists. However, the symbolic statute of an image is never defined beforehand. It is the result of the producers’ choice, as well as of the audience’s opinion and of the context of reception. Images appear, fascinate... and wear out with time.

Conclusion

What provisional epistemological assessment can we present in the conclusion of this short essay about concepts that migrate to the ICS? After all, what comprises the specificity of a discipline built upon a crossroads? The originality of the ICS project lies in the attention dedicated to the *relationship* between concepts, the way we position ourselves within it. We set out to study the constitution and circulation of knowledge under a perspective that is both systemic and phenomenological. It should be mentioned that our core strategy is to examine how the parameters of informational processes “remain together” and evolve together. The acceleration of evolutions and transformations induced by the dissemination of electronic media makes this type of research both urgent and possible: instead of trying to take possession of objects and fixing them for the sake of greater comfort during the study, it takes interest in its movement and metamorphoses. Instead of describing the state of semiotic, material and social frameworks associated to the communication of knowledge at a given point in space and time, it attempts to discern cultural, informational, economic dynamics, and the social environment where they are inserted. In our opinion, this is the challenge for the ICS in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Device”: coherent and circumscribable set of objects, actors, processes geared towards a certain purpose.

2. It is this way that the *Photoshop* software, for instance, is about to considerably change our relationship with image.

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