

Can a Document be Oral?

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Abstract

Research consistently indicates that professionals rely heavily on oral information. However, our understanding of orality as a mode to convey information remains limited. One approach to remedying this knowledge gap lies in exploring whether oral information may be approached in a manner consistent with approaches to non-oral information, specifically information in documents. This paper explores research in document studies, information behavior, and social constructionism in an effort to increase disciplinary knowledge about information made available orally. Partial results of a study conducted to conceptualize and empirically observe oral documents are presented including: 1) a discussion on how the literature supports the concept of an oral document and 2) a presentation of empirical data that demonstrates an utterance can incorporate the properties of a document. Discussions of the implications, research design limitations, and recommendations for future research conclude this presentation.

1. Introduction

This article presents an initial report of research that conceives an *oral document* and finds empirical evidence supporting the concept. Articulating the concept of an *oral document* provides a useful strategy for increasing disciplinary knowledge about oral information.

A discussion of the concept precedes a description of the results that reveal how an utterance can have characteristics of a document. Specifically, this paper explains how a document incorporates properties and empirically explores whether orality, defined as word-of-mouth transactions, can as well. This presentation represents an initial step in a larger research goal to demonstrate proof of oral documents. In pursuit of the broader goal, this study addresses the research

question: can information conveyed orally incorporate properties of a document?

This study builds on the intersection of document studies, information behavior and social constructionism: Document studies research notes that documents can become available in a broad range of modes; information behavior findings tell us that people prefer to obtain information by talking; and, social constructionism holds that knowledge can emerge orally. Recognizing this intersection provides an opportunity to explore whether one can become informed through orality in ways similar to how one can become informed with (non-oral) documents. This study contributes to this area of the research by introducing and presenting a working definition of the concept of an oral document.

2. Background

This section discusses how the concept of an *oral document* is supported in the literature.

Definitions of a *document* reflect its widely recognized characteristics of providing evidence [7], as in proof, and of being informative [2]. However, Frohmann [9, 10] argues that relying solely on a definition to articulate a concept has limitations. Doing so restricts the formation of new knowledge [10].

In Buckland's classic work [3], he weakens the traditional notion that a document must be a textual record by describing how a "documentalist increasingly emphasized whatever functioned as a document rather than traditional physical forms of documents" [3]. This assertion follows his earlier observation that people can be informed by objects, events, and intentional communiqués [2]. His work builds on Briet's [7], having asserted a definition of *document* that accommodates any number of different modalities, including an animal, such as an antelope, and an oral discussion—specifically, a professor discussing subject matter while teaching. The question then becomes how does one identify a document by noting its functions to inform.

Numerous document studies scholars explain that a *document* can be identified with a definition or by noting practices that provide evidence or make it possible to become informed [2, 3, 6, 7, 9]. Both approaches reveal that the concept of a document accommodates numerous modes in which one can become available [3, 6, 7, 10].

Identifying a document by noting practices used to create it means considering *how* it can be informative [3, 11]. Findings in another area of information science, information behavior, provide insight into practices used to obtain information.

Scholars repeatedly acknowledge that people prefer to obtain information by talking [4, 13, 19]. Moreover, obtaining information while talking face-to-face persists despite the availability and proliferation of technology [14, 15]. Several scholars suggest that orality is preferred when accessing new information [1, 5, 8, 13]. This suggestion implies that one method for discovering new information lies in identifying substantive comments conveyed orally.

This implication is strengthened by how information science scholars have increasingly relied on a new theoretical perspective, social constructionism. According to this metatheory, contributions to knowledge are made in writing, through actions (or practices), or by talking [13, 17]. These contributions inform dialog that determines social reality [17]. This study looks at practices involved in oral contributions to knowledge in order to determine if they resemble contributions in other modes that are considered documents.

This research presentation demonstrates that documents become available in a variety of modes, which facilitates conceiving of one that becomes available orally.

3. Identifying a document

The main contribution of this paper lies in presenting a method for analyzing utterances to determine the information that they convey. The method stems from the following discussion of the informative nature of documents.

Document studies literature provides insight into identifying a document by practices used to become informed. Frohmann [9] refers to the *properties of a document* as evidence of practices that render a document informative. He identifies four properties that shape and configure the informative nature of documents as much as they describe documentary practices [9].

First, the institutionalization property refers to how documents adhere to institutional norms and influence

institutional processes in ways that perpetuate or reinforce a context [9]. For example, a statement that addresses someone using the term, “your Honor,” refers to and perpetuates the legal context.

Next, the social discipline property ensures documents can be perpetuated, given changes in a context over time [9]. The social discipline property involves assuring that appropriate persons are trained to re-produce and oversee the processes of re-creating a document [9]. A document that incorporates detailed pedagogical knowledge provides evidence that its creator is an experienced educator trained in providing curricular documents.

The third property, historicity, examines how documentary practices are changed and adapted to ensure that a document continues to hold weight over time [9]. Such an adaption occurs, for example, when professionals use intranets to access organizational information that was once text based.

Finally, the weight or significance of a document is reflected in evidence of the materiality property it incorporates [9]. In an example from science, the materiality of gravity is detected, although not seen, in a falling object. Evidence of materiality of oral information can be detected in the sound of voice (tone, register, and more), which can embody authority and other characteristics [22, see also 19].

Frohmann’s explanation of the properties of documents [9] offers a way to identify how a document is shaped and influenced by practices that facilitate access to information. Frohmann [9] refers to the properties as an analytical notion, explaining that they must be present because without them there would be no document. My study extends that explanation to consider if information that incorporates the properties of a document is, in fact, a document, even when that information is made available orally [19]. Extending Frohmann’s properties [9] as criteria for identifying a document informs a way to empirically observe if an utterance can be a document.

4. Method

This section describes the method used to address the research question of whether an utterance can incorporate properties of a document.

A field study gathered oral data. Six observations were conducted in U.S. Pacific Northwest information institutions, organizations that primarily deal with information products or services. The participating organizations, which included two libraries (one academic and one public) and a museum, had multiple levels of staff, categories of customers, facilities, and institutional partners. Oral data were gathered during

regularly scheduled staff meetings held in spaces where they typically occurred. Specifically, I collected utterances made by three middle managers as they met face-to-face with peer managers or with staff whom they supervised. One observation also included a participant manager's supervisor. Gestures during the observations, comments by other staff (considered secondary participants), and participant managers' responses to brief follow-up questions augmented the oral data when these observations increased understanding of a participant manager's utterance.

While my ears and eyes were considered primary data gathering instruments, I also used handwritten field notes and audio recordings. After transcribing the recordings, I analyzed each utterance four times, each time with the objective of identifying one of the four properties posited by Frohmann [9].

Finally, oral data that incorporated all four properties of a document articulated by Frohmann [9] were isolated and studied in greater detail. Although Frohmann [9] asserts that a document may have one or more properties, my study stipulates that an utterance must incorporate each of the four properties before considering whether it may have document status [19]. This level of rigor assists in exploring a messy medium.

5. Results and analysis

Data gathered include audio recordings and field notes of six meetings. Each observation lasted sixty to ninety (60–90) minutes. The results are based on analyzing every utterance in the resulting 7.5 hours of recorded oral data four successive times in order to identify if each incorporates the four properties of a document. This section discusses the results.

Each transcription was first reviewed to reveal which utterances incorporate the materiality property with its evidence of physicality, significance, and weight. The sound of each participant manager's voice, in part, gives the utterances physical qualities. The materiality of an utterance is also detected in how a participant manager's title and role are asserted to perpetuate organizational values, including ones involving the hierarchy and power structure.

Materiality is observed in excerpts like, "Um, so, what I think we should do is ah start making these requests anew..." from the public library setting and, "Well, ok. I'll set up a template, set up a template, in [the staff digital storage area]..." from the academic library setting. Sounds like "um" and "ok" that begin selected utterances were prominent throughout each observation; each participant manager routinely used a specific set of them to signal and distinguish certain

information. Evidence of materiality in these sounds is also noted in how others in the meeting hear the sounds and do not interrupt the remainder of the utterance that follows. They do interrupt other utterances made during each observation.

The second round of data analysis identifies how an utterance incorporates the institutionalization property, or contextual references made to the broader organization. For example, the excerpt from the public library oral data mentioned (in the paragraph) above announces a change in the process to request equipment. In it, the participant manager tells staff to submit future requests through him, their supervisor, who will make certain a central department processes them. The full utterance incorporates references to a central department, the administrator in charge of it, the participant manager's department, the organization's equipment process, and the localized organizational shorthand for middle managers. Each of these references helps situate the utterance and maintain its relevance to specific sub-contexts as well as to the institution itself.

Next, evidence of the social discipline property was detected in how the utterances incorporate information that had been made more precise by including specific terms, utilizing professional preparation, or reflecting contributions made by other meeting participants (secondary participants, specifically staff or peer managers). For example, an utterance from the museum setting included phrases as, "everything-not-to-do... information" and "don't-even-think-about-doing-that icons." Secondary participants recognize that the participant manager refers to the safety and instructional information, included in educational and marketing materials, and how challenging it can be to present.

Finally, the oral data were analyzed for evidence of a change in the method used to access some information, the historicity property. In one utterance, the academic library participant manager changes the process by which a staff member is to obtain needed permissions to market library services. "Ok. Let's make sure that we go into his class. And I, I'll be willing to make the bridge, you know since he's kind of you know, you know what." The staff member would typically obtain the needed information directly from a given professor. But in the one instance under discussion, the staff member would instead obtain it indirectly through the participant manager.

Overall, the data analysis reveals that fourteen (14) empirically-observed utterances incorporate the properties of a document.

In addition to identifying evidence of properties, analysis reveals additional insight into the oral data. The fourteen utterances vary in length, but typically

end with a change in discussion focus to a new meeting agenda item, related topic, or different sub-topic. Some of the utterances only involve a participant manager's words. Others incorporate words spoken by other staff (secondary participants). For example, a public library staff member asks, "And should we be or should I be doing that? Or is that something--..." Her question provides the participant manager with an opportunity to add clarifying information which conveys additional evidence of the social discipline property. Where the data presented to this point demonstrate that oral information involves giving information, this interaction suggests that it can also involve communication, or evidence that information is also received and used.

Data analysis also reveals an anomaly. The fourteen (14) utterances that incorporate the properties emerge from five of the six observations. An observation conducted in the museum setting differed from the other five because the meeting observed involved planning—i.e., identifying needed information and determining strategies—for future programs that the museum would be co-sponsoring. The meeting addressed less routine and more precedent setting work in an effort to make joint decisions with a new co-sponsor. The staged nature of museum work means that at any given time some staff members have more information about issues related to a particular exhibit than others. In this observation, a manager, who was a peer to the participant manager, was the only museum staff member who had met with the co-sponsor and therefore had the most relevant information. Data reveal that the participant manager asked clarifying questions of and reiterated information contributed by this peer manager in utterances such as:

"Here's what I-- I think. First of all, we do need to figure how much the tickets are. And, the second thing is how many are we selling. For us, capacity to sell... are we trying to 1,000 tickets because that's a huge undertaking for us [sic]. Or, are we trying to sell 50 tickets for 5 nights. So, those are-- I mean just logistically what are we—".

And later, "and who's ticketing, do we need to figure that part out?" And still later, "I can't think of any time that we've ever done anything like that. Where somebody else has sold our tickets.... Not that it can't be done." Staff members took notes and nodded in agreement while listening to these utterances (evidence of the materiality property).

These utterances incorporate evidence of the participant manager directing staff activities (the materiality property), displaying expertise to lead museum programming efforts (the social discipline property), and using knowledge to negotiate relevant logistics within the organization (the institutionalization property). Yet the utterances do not reflect a change in access to information (the historicity property). This result suggests that an utterance which incorporates the four properties of a document must originate from situations in which a decision can be made. In these types of situations, the participant manager is able to utter a statement that resembles a document because she has more capacity, in terms of knowledge (the social discipline property) or position within the organizational structure (the materiality property), to utter one. That is, this anomaly provides evidence that the properties interact to create a document.

Analyzing this anomaly further demonstrates how utterances that do not incorporate all four properties utilized in this study still provide information. But, that information differs from information provided in utterances that do incorporate the four properties. This result raises questions about the nature of the utterances of interest given the result design. For example, can an utterance resemble a document when spoken in situations where either no decision is made or a previous decision is affirmed?

By presenting empirical evidence of fourteen (14) utterances that incorporate the four properties used in this study, this presentation of results explains how orality can resemble a document.

6. Discussion and recommendations

Conceptualizing and using a field study method to gather and analyze oral data helps explain the way in which a document can be oral. The results indicate that conducting work to further develop the concept of an oral document and continued exploration of oral information are worthy efforts. Demonstrating that an utterance can incorporate the properties of a document results in a number of implications, including the conceptual and pragmatic ones addressed in this section.

This study approaches the concept of an oral document by exploring how the term *document* has been defined in the literature. First, this study recognizes that one can determine whether an artifact is a document by considering its definition. The outcome of this study makes it possible to propose a working definition of the concept: An *oral document* is a type of document conveying evidence or information

furnished orally and incorporating one or more properties of a document. While this study relies on four properties of a document, this working definition recognizes how an anomaly in the oral data supports Frohmann's assertion [9] that a document may incorporate one or more properties. The proposed definition reflects how the analysis of the data suggests that documents incorporating a different number or combination of properties provide information albeit different from those that incorporate the four properties used in this study. Future research needed to substantiate the results will benefit from having this working definition.

Next, this study also recognizes that one can determine whether an artifact is a document by considering practices used to create it. This investigation relies on document studies discussions of how practices inform document properties. However, literature in information science and allied disciplines investigate practices that inform documentation processes. Future exploration of *oral documents* should determine how research about documenting and related practices can be extended to the concept [see 16].

Based in part on findings in document studies, the results reveal how focusing on document properties made it possible to identify utterances that resemble documents. The results also support the need for additional research to increase understanding of document properties [9, 19]. Future research questions should ask how the properties interact to make information available, whether additional properties exist, and if a specified number of properties must be incorporated into an artifact in order to extend document status to it.

The second part of this study examines empirical evidence to discover that utterances used in situ incorporate the properties of a document. The data analysis also leads to a number of pragmatic implications.

One outcome provides insight into utterances that incorporate the properties of a document and the generation of knowledge, which relates to questions about oral documents and fixity. Analysis reflects new knowledge and evidence of the subsequent creation of additional knowledge. For example, one utterance from the museum setting establishes an on-going process for a mobile exhibit that will inform tasks, supply schedules, provide employee training, and more that had yet to be determined. This result suggests that oral contributions to knowledge can precede action-based and written contributions, which in the example emerge as new practices and related written information [19]. This suggestion substantiates research findings that suggest people use orality to access new information [12, 14, 18].

To consider the materiality of documents that are oral, future research is needed to investigate whether the fixity of an oral document would only need to persist as long as information it conveys is new. The oral data reveal how an utterance can help create knowledge. Further study should address references to or subsequent uses of oral documents, which are not stable in ways consistent with traditional documents. Such an investigation needs to account for Frohmann's assertion [10] that a document can lack fixity and retain its document status: Although it may introduce ambiguity, a document lacking fixity can still support meaningful communication [10]. It is anticipated that the findings will lead to questions about how oral documents are used vis-à-vis non-oral documents. A future study that compares how oral information and (non-oral) documents are used over a longer period of time would increase understanding in this research area.

The results additionally raise questions about oral documents and genre studies. A *genre* is a communicative act used to respond in a routine manner to certain situations [21]. Relying on all four properties of a document, especially historicity, means that utterances identified as incorporating the properties of a document reflect organizational decisions regarding access to information. Finding that one particular type of utterance incorporates the four document properties suggests that orality may be routinely used to make certain kinds of organizational information available. This suggestion raises questions about how orality is used in other routine situations. Moreover, it demonstrates that future research is needed to increase knowledge of how oral documents relate to current understandings of *genre*.

Next, leaders and managers rely on orality extensively. Can these types of professionals be trained to interact more effectively with oral information? The results of this study begin to inform a set of skills for managing oral information. That is, the results suggest that oral information can be informative, or in effect can document information, when it has certain characteristics. Bolstering managerial training and development efforts with insights provided by these results could increase professionals' knowledge about when and how to rely on orality to make information available.

This paper presents research that reflects an initial step in determining whether a document can be oral. It also takes an initial step toward increasing disciplinary understanding that oral information can have structure and convey information in multiple ways. The results of this study relate to findings about *information richness* [1, 5] and *social presence* [11].

As with *information richness* or the volume of information conveyed via a particular mode [1, 5], the properties of a document are concerned with what evidence is conveyed. Like *social presence*, the properties of a document aid in articulating what information is present, which can increase awareness of what information is not present. This awareness can provide new insight into efforts to facilitate computer-mediated communication that adds value to limitations, which occur with face-to-face communication or that goes “beyond being there” [11]. The results continue the dialogs surrounding these two concepts by providing a different approach for studying oral information.

However, oral information does not only stem from face-to-face orality, but is also made available via a variety of computer-mediated applications—e.g., phones, text messaging, video conferencing, and more. Future research is needed to leverage the current results to increase understanding of the informative nature of oral information, whether it is face-to-face or computer-mediated. For example, Frohmann [9] asserts that additional properties of documents may exist. A future investigation should identify if computer-mediated oral information can incorporate properties of a document and, if so, whether they differ from properties that face-to-face oral information can incorporate. This result suggests that future research repeat this study by entering a setting and observing which practices help create documents used within it. Using such an approach would mean not relying solely on an established list of properties, which again are evidence of practice [9], as is done herein.

Understanding oral information by examining how it is informative can present insight needed to treat that information. For example, the results provide an opportunity to review current practices that treat digital, recorded, or written versions of a speech as primary documents. The method used in this study to articulate how a face-to-face utterance is informative can and should be used to determine how that utterance differs from other versions of it. Repeating this study in a way that excludes a-priori properties would assist such an investigation.

Moreover, conducting additional research can inform efforts to design information systems that do not duplicate information which is better supported orally. Information behavior research repeatedly finds that people prefer to use informal information, which includes obtaining information by talking to others [1, 4, 8, 12, 13, 15]. The results introduce questions: What is the nature of an oral information flow? How should information systems account for it? What portion of information supported orally needs supplemental support provided by non-oral information systems?

When it is effective to transfer oral information to an information system, the results of this study offer a method for identifying and accounting for information captured and transmitted in an utterance.

One final note addresses the research method utilized. While the anomaly discussed above and other utterances like it do not resemble a document, they are informative. The method used to identify utterances that incorporate the properties of a document also increase understanding of how the anomalous utterance is informative. The method used, which involves determining the properties of a document that an utterance incorporates, has potential for discovering the informative nature of oral information, regardless of whether or not it is a document.

7. Research design considerations

The scope and limitations of the research design are described in this section.

First, this study does not suggest that all utterances need to be analyzed in order to treat whatever information they convey. Instead, it recognizes that information conveyed by a subset of utterances may be of interest to information professionals.

Next, this exploration of a new concept, a document made available orally, is necessarily limited in scope. It focuses on words uttered while face-to-face although the results may someday help increase understanding of other aspects of orality that can also influence oral information. Future research should determine if and how a range of actions (gestures, blinking, hand movements, eye contact, audience response, and more) contribute to information conveyed orally.

The scope also excludes instant messaging, teleconferencing, voice mail and other modes used to transmit information that has characteristics of orality. Additionally, while oral history (an oral recount of events within one’s lifetime) and oral tradition (verbal messages passed over at least one generation by word-of-mouth [20]) exemplify what may constitute an oral document, the broader focus herein investigates everyday, contemporary orality in organizational settings. Research beyond this study is needed to address orality, oral documents, and related phenomena.

In addition to the scope, the research design has other limitations that future research can address. The results are based on a small sample of data. Future studies may incorporate a larger sample from a greater number of information institutions or from different industries. A larger data set should examine not only face-to-face, but also mediated and recorded oral data

(in electronic mail, instant text messaging, voice mail messages, and other media).

As mentioned above, the method used to operationalize the concept leads to the identification of one type of oral document. The study identifies utterances that incorporate each of the four properties despite Frohmann's [9] assertion that the number and types of properties incorporated into a document may vary; and, the results substantiate this assertion. The fourteen empirically-observed utterances focus on organizational decisions that involve the flow of information. The a-priori strategy used helps identify the fourteen utterances because organizations and information science share the goal maintaining access to needed information.

Instead of using an a-priori research strategy, future research should involve a field study during which documents and practices used to create them are observed as they emerge in situ. This type of approach lies in noting how context-specific practices inform properties incorporated into documents, regardless of their mode, that are being used. Such a study may reveal that documents can be informative in different ways than those that depend on the four properties on which this study relies.

Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that the concept of an oral document and oral information in general are worthy of continued study to substantiate and build on the results presented.

8. Conclusion

The goal to demonstrate the existence of oral documents involves several objectives. This article accomplishes an initial objective of this larger goal by: 1) explaining how literature in document studies, information behavior, and social constructionism supports the concept of an oral document and 2) presenting empirical evidence that oral information can incorporate the properties of a document. This paper focuses on the first of three stages involved in analyzing the oral observation data (subsequent stages not reported compare oral documents empirically observed within and across three research contexts [19]).

The presentation of the results and subsequent discussion explain how face-to-face utterances can have characteristics of a document. Developing the concept of an oral document further involves approaching information that becomes available orally in ways similar to approaching information that becomes available in other modes. This study reveals one approach, a systematic method for determining how and why an utterance is informative. The steps

involve identifying whether an utterance incorporates the properties of a document by:

1. noting significant phrases, words and structure that lend weight to an utterance (evidence of the materiality property);
2. clarifying how one or more institutions influence the information being conveyed (evidence of the institutionalization property);
3. determining the preparation or training of a speaker within some context (evidence of the social discipline property); and
4. identifying how the method used to access some information is changed (evidence of the historicity property).

Conclusions and recommendations discussed include how the results encourage continued study of the concept of an oral document as a way to increase disciplinary knowledge of oral information.

9. References

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