



**ISKO FRANCE**  
International Society  
for Knowledge Organisation

11<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the French ISKO Chapter, Paris, 11-12 July 2017

**The impact of the works of  
Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet  
on the development of the epistemology  
of documentation and information sciences in Poland**



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# 1. Introduction

## Purpose:

- to investigate the influence of Francophone pioneers of the documentation and information science on the development of the epistemological foundations of this discipline in Poland

## Limitations:

- attention is paid to the reception of ideas and writings by Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet - two figures who played a major role in shaping the European concept of documentation and information science
- the study is mainly concerned with the publications of the most important Polish researchers of the book, the library, documentation and information
- the search for references to Otlet's and Briet's works was also performed in contemporary Polish literature of information science, trying to assess the sustainability of their conceptual impact on the epistemological foundations of information science in Poland

## 2. Epistemology

The meanings of the names "epistemology" or "theory of cognition" have changed in history, but they have always covered issues that are considered particularly important, even basic. Generally, epistemology is a division of philosophy that deals with human cognition –

- its object
- its content
- ways to know
- borders of cognition
- criteria for cognition.

# Epistemology vs methodology

Epistemology has both descriptive and normative dimensions:

- it describes the processes of knowledge creation and their results, i.e. forms of knowledge and its properties
- it indicates the conditions of the desired, optimal course of cognition

In the normative dimension, epistemology is closed to methodology – it investigate the methods that are actually adopted at various historical stages of investigation into different areas with the aim of systematizing the presuppositions of a particular field at a particular time.

In relation to the specific sciences their epistemological and methodological bases are considered together. This is also the approach applied in this presentation.

# Basic epistemological questions in documentation and information science

What kind of knowledge is accepted?

- 1) How is knowledge gained and justified?
- 2) How is knowledge presented? Is it in the form of scientific laws, one general theoretical theory or many detailed theories combined, for example, to try to solve some practical problem?
- 3) What does knowledge mean, what does it say?
- 4) What knowledge is supposed to serve, what is the purpose of cognition (world description, explanation, prediction, practical application)?

Two basic epistemological paradigms in D&IS

- based on positivistic (modernist, neo-positivist) epistemology and methodology
- based on phenomenological or interpretative epistemology and methodology

### 3. Epistemological aspects of the work of Paul Otlet



Eric de Grolier as early as 1945 named Paul Otlet a pioneer in documentation and international co-operation

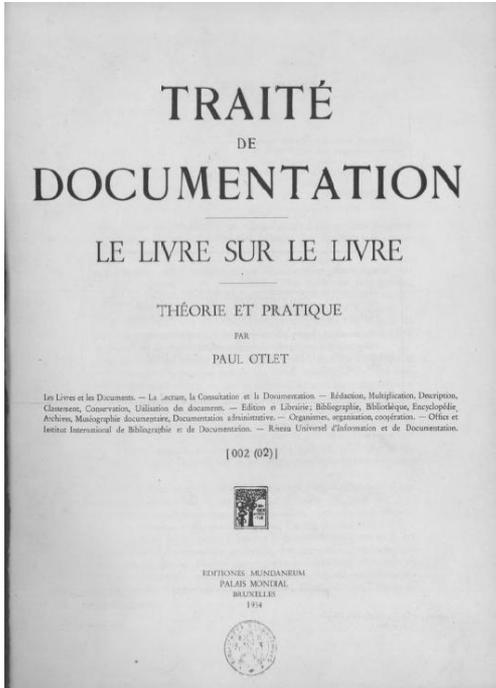
Paul Otlet (1868-1944) is known as the founder of European Documentation.

Otlet's most important achievements:

- organizational efforts in creating a global documentation network (IIB, IID, Mundaneum), new methods and tools for representation and sharing of knowledge (standardization, UDC and *Repertoire Bibliographic Universel*, etc.)
- theoretical work in which he systematically and comprehensively presented his concept of a new approach to providing access to the resources of recorded knowledge and the science that supported it, in particular published in 1934 *Traité de documentation: le livre sur le livre: théorie et pratique*, which today is considered as the first monograph devoted to information science.

# *Traité de documentation:Le livre sur le livre. Théorie et pratique (Brussels, 1934)*

## The most distinctive features of Otlet's conception of documentation science



### Document as extended category of the book

- explicitly embedding in the culture of the book
- the book is treated as the most important vehicle of knowledge in the history of humanity, a material form of positive knowledge enabling its social function
- three models of the book: "book-organism", "book-mental energy", "book-machine"

### Positivistic concept of social transfer of knowledge

- the objective existence of knowledge recorded in documents
- the laws governing the world of fixed knowledge (bibliographic laws )
- description of this world with one general scientific theory
- that provides a basis for understanding the social functioning of knowledge (culture of knowledge) and to effectively support it through organized documentation activities.

## 4. Epistemological aspects of the work of Suzanne Briet



Suzanne Briet (1894-1989) „Madame Documentation” represents second generation of European documentation, acting in the interwar and in the first decade of the postwar period.

Briet’s concept of documentation science can be regarded as a kind of development of Otlet's idea enriched by the growing awareness of the role of access to knowledge in shaping modern society.

As a professional librarian in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, she was involved in modernization of the library bibliographic and information services.

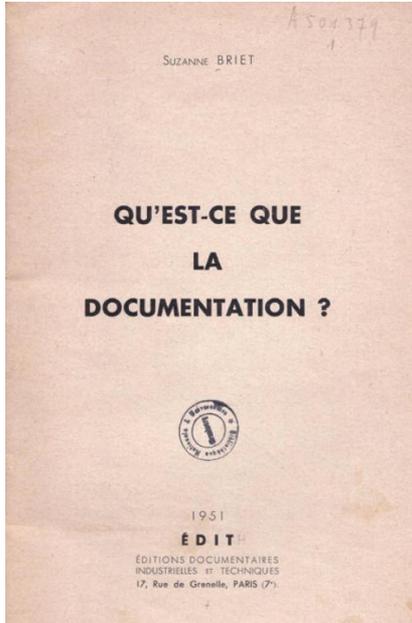
Briet participated in the founding (in 1931) and in leadership of the Union Française des Organismes de Documentation (UFOD) – the French documentation organization

She was a leader in developing professional education in documentation in France.

She was also the vice president of the International Federation of Documentation (FID).

# Qu'est-ce que la documentation? (Paris, 1951)

## The most distinctive features of Briet's conception of documentation science



Briet continued the Otlet's thinking of documentation as a practical and research activity that has a key role to play in the development of modern science and society based on the culture of science (scientific culture) shaped by the widespread use of knowledge in social and economic development

### Document as evidence

*Any concrete or symbolic indexical sign [indice], preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of reconstructing, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon*

### Documentation as cultural technique; documentation science as a metascience

Briet emphasizes the indexable nature of documents, and indexing treats as a process that, by indication of indexing links between documents, maps the knowledge contained therein.

### Cultural context of documentation and interpretative approach to information

**/ documentation needs:** specialized cultures in researchers in particular domains

Positivist approach with elements of phenomenological epistemology

# 5. Reception of Otlet's concept of documentation science in Poland

## Otlet's concepts in the community of Polish engineers

- Feliks Kucharzewski
- Stanislaw Rodowicz

## Otlet's concept in the works of the Polish theorists of bibliology and bibliography

- Adam Łysakowski
- Jan Muszkowski
- Stefan Vrtel-Wierczyński
- Karol Głombiowski
- Krzysztof Migoń

## Otlet's concepts in the works of theorist of documentation and information science

- Maria Dembowska
- Historical studies

## The community of Polish engineers: followers of Otlet's conceptions of documentation practice



Professor **Feliks Kucharczyński** (1849-1935), engineer, historian of technology, and bibliographer of technical literature.

On his initiative in 1899 the Library Committee of STP (Polish Engineers Association) was created. The Bibliography and Documentation Section of this Committee represented Poland in IIB



**Stanisław Rodowicz** (1893-1940) - the last president of the STP Library Committee in the interwar period, particularly active in co-operation with the IIB, and then IID.

In the independent Poland after the end of the World War I, Rodowicz promoted the organization of the world documentation system and implemented the idea of documentation standards, including the use of UDC as the international classification of technical literature.

In 1932 the Polish Engineers Association established the Bibliographic Information Bureau in Warsaw, which in the structure of the IIB acted as the Polish national information center.

## Otlet's concept in the works of the Polish theorists of bibliology and bibliography: Adam Łysakowski



**Adam Łysakowski** (1895-1952) - a librarian, library scientist, and organizer of Polish academic and research librarianship – in 1936 published a review of *Traité de documentation*, describing Otlet's work as "**a comprehensive lecture on systematic book science**", the evidence of maturity of bibliology (book science), which in a modern way treated the book as any document, "the means of providing or reconstructing thought in all its forms" .

Łysakowski treated *Traité de documentation* as "the first great manual of bibliology", and in his opinion Otlet was particularly predestinated to write it as "a longtime, enthusiastic pioneer of book-related affairs".

Otlet's identification of bibliology with documentology (documentation science) was interpreted by Łysakowski as "modern view of our science", because today "the book is as much as any document." In this modern view bibliology / documentology is a "branch of general knowledge about means of communicating and communicating thoughts".

*Traité de documentation* and Otlet's organizational work leading to emerging a worldwide documentation network raised Łysakowski's recognition and strengthened his conviction of the importance of documentation for the development of international scientific cooperation.

## Otlet's concept in the works of the Polish theorists of bibliology and bibliography: Jan Muszkowski



**Jan Muszkowski** (1882-1953) was one of the most outstanding Polish librarians of the interwar period, and after the war he was the founder of the first Polish center of academic education in library science. He created the sociological concept of bibliology (book science) and presented it in the book *Życie książki* (Life of the Book, 1936, 1951).

Also for Muszkowski, Otlet's concept of bibliology/documentology was interesting primarily because of its embedding in the widely understood book culture. However, bearing in mind the distinctness of the tasks that documentalists faced with the traditional tasks of librarians and bibliographers, Muszkowski took a critical and skeptical approach to both Otlet's theoretical and practical concepts.

Muszkowski maintained that **the main mistake of documentalists was the gap between theory and practice, between the great intentions and real possibilities of library and archival institutions that would be the area of expansion of documentation.** Despite these objections, however, he observed the fact that the documentation was developing very dynamically and more and more, and around the issues of method and organization of documentation work there gradually was developing a new scientific discipline.

## Otlet's concept in the works of the Polish theorists of bibliology and bibliography: Stefan Vrtel-Wierczyński



**Stefan Vrtel-Wierczyński** (1886-1963) was another Polish bibliographer interested in Otlet's conceptions; he was a historian of literature, prominent librarian and theorist of bibliography.

He submitted the most complete and thorough analysis of Otlet's ideas contained in the *Traité de documentation* and articles and papers presented at the international congresses of documentation.

In the book *The Theory of Bibliography in the Outline*, written during wartime and occupation, and published in 1951, Wierczyński devoted a lot of space to Otlet's concepts, analyzing them in different aspects and contexts.

Especially Wierczyński was interested in Otlet's conception of bibliology/documentology – its inner structure as a comprehensive book science.

The broad definition of a book-document as a thought fixed on any medium, Wierczyński considered to be a justified from the point of view of documentation of all signs of human intellectual life, but questionable from the standpoint of bibliology.

## Otlet's concept in the works of the Polish theorists of bibliology and bibliography: Karol Głombiowski



**Karol Głombiowski** (1913-1986) was the founder of the Polish school of functional bibliology, based on the theoretical concept of the book as an instrument of social communication. In his most important monograph, *The Book in the Process of Social Communication* (Wrocław 1980), he referred to Otlet's perception of books in functional terms:

*to represent the world, using a system of optical or other signs in a practical and convenient manner, suitable for storage, communication and dissemination* (Głombiowski, 1980, p. 10).

For Otlet this kind of approach to the book notion was the basis for the development of the book – document concept.

For Głombiowski this concept was too general and abstract, but it offered a starting point for thinking about book theory in terms of **the instrument of social communication**.

## Otlet's concept in the works of the Polish theorists of bibliology and bibliography: Krzysztof Migoń



**Krzysztof Migoń**, an outstanding contemporary theoretician of bibliology who developed in Poland **the book science understood as the science of book culture**, repeatedly referred to Otlet's concept. In particular, he referred to Otlet's theses and observations on the broad definition of the book concept, the role of the **book as a symbol of culture**, and to Otlet's outline of the structure of bibliology / documentation science.

He drew attention to the fact that:

*The functional concept in bibliology corresponds to the theories of information and communication that emerged through the development of information and communication sciences. They allowed the bibliologists to pay more attention to the properties of the book as a way of recording information and a tool of communication. **The information and communication orientation enriched the research instruments of bibliology and brought interesting results both in research on the theory and history of the book as well as in its contemporary situation** (Migoń, 2005, p. 52).*

## „Bibliology” and „bibliology and informatology” as the official names of the discipline in Poland

Otlet's conception of bibliology / documentology as a **general science** which subject matter is all documents as "documented entities" and their functioning is one of the most often referred to by the Polish bibliologists.

It can be seen as related to the notion of **bibliology as a science integrating the disciplines that study issues of the book, the library and information**, including both the pure book science, library science, bibliography and documentation and information science.

For a long time the name "bibliology" in this sense was officially used in the Polish nomenclature of scientific disciplines, and therefore information science researchers received degrees and academic titles in the field of bibliology.

Discussions about the adequacy of this name in relation to the contemporary research problems of information science led in 2010 to replacement it with the name "bibliology and informatology". However, the strict separation of the extension of these two terms is still considered impossible.

# Otlet's concepts in the works of theoreticians of documentation and information science: Maria Dembowska



Maria Dembowska (1914-2008) was the most important figure in the Polish information science; she was a librarian and bibliographer, particularly interested in determining the status of documentation and information science, distinctive features of its research problems and methodology, evolution, interdisciplinary links.

The most extensively she discussed Otlet's ideas in the book *Documentation and scientific information: An outline of issues and directions of development* (1965).

She noted that the earliest assumptions of Otlet's concept of documentation science were presented in 1903 in the article *Les sciences bibliographiques et la documentation*, where for the first time Otlet indicated the need for a broad understanding of the concept of the book so as to cover all graphic documents.

Trying to determine the specific features of information science as a scientific discipline, Dembowska referred to Otlet's opinion about **close relation of documentation to organization of science** and about **practical dimension of documentology**.

She postulated to treat documentation and information science **as a praxeological science** which aim is to improve the human acting – to improve access to knowledge that determines the development of science.

# Otlet's concepts in the Polish historical studies on documentation and information science

Interest in Otlet's work in Poland was again increased in the 1970s and 1980s (probably related to the launching of the UBC program by the IFLA and publication of W. Boy Rayward's monograph *The universe of information. The work of Paul Otlet for documentation and international organization*, 1975).

**Ewa Żgutowicz** (1977) re-examined Otlet's concept of information science, paying attention to its bibliological approach.

**Helena Jarecka** published two articles (1980, 1986) about the history of international documentation co-operation and the role played by Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine in its development .

Another return of interest of Otlet's work took place in the first decade of the 21st century, which on the one hand was related to the closedown of the International Federation of Information and Documentation (Anna Augustyniak, 2004), and on the other, to the growing awareness of the similarities between Otlet's concepts and development of contemporary IT and information services (B. Sosińska-Kalata, 2010).

In December 2009 the Polish Society for Scientific Information (PTIN), in co-operation with the Institute of Library and Information Science of the University of Silesia and Polish ISKO Section organized a special scientific session titled *Paul Otlet – the architect of knowledge*.

## 6. Reception of Briet's work in Poland

Completely different is the reception of concepts and work of Suzanne Briet in Poland.

Her work was probably well known to Polish researchers, but references to her publications, or more precisely to the two most important publications – the manifesto *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* and the paper *Bibliothécaires et documentalistes*, appeared quite late and rather sporadically.

Summaries of early Briet's articles were published in the journal "Przegląd Biblioteczny" (Library Review) in the 1930s

The first reference to Briet's works in Dembowska's monograph *Documentation and Scientific Information* (1965)

It must be remembered that the most important work of Briet *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* was published only in recent years of her professional activity, i.e. in the 1950s.

In Poland, it was a difficult period of subordination of all institutions and organizations to strict controlling by central communist authorities.

After the war the community of documentalists was involved in services addressed to the field of natural sciences and engineering, economy and administration; they were focused more on practical problems than on theoretical considerations.

# Briet's concept in Dembowska's works

Maria Dembowska referred to Briet's manifesto *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* in the monograph *Documentation and Scientific Information* (1965). It was not a deep analysis of Briet's concept, but only two modest references:

- in the first Dembowska noted that in the postwar literature devoted to documentation there are only few discussing general issues and mentioned the brochure by Briet.
- for the second time, Dembowska referred to Briet's concepts in the context of the need to co-ordinate documentation services at the state level, believing that the state should support development of this important activity.

In Dembowska's concept of D&IS presented both in her first monograph in 1965 and in the next from 1991, there are some points tangent to the theses of Briet:

- Dembowska emphasized the importance of research on users' information needs and practices for the development of useful information services (Dembowska, 1991, p. 87), which coincides with Briet's postulates of exploring specialist cultures of researchers in different domains served by documentation professionals.
- Like Briet, Dembowska saw the main task of D&IS as closely related to the organization of researchers' access to the knowledge needed in their research.
- Dembowska emphasized the partly common subject matter of documentation science and bibliography and library science, and stressed that what is the main subject of research in these disciplines is only a small part of the scope of documentation and information science research.

# Briet's concept and the concept of information culture and the idea of interaction og GLAM services in modern information science

In the modern reality of information technology, information services and information use, two theses of Suzanne Briet's take on a new meaning for the epistemology of information science:

- thesis on the cultural dimension of its research field, i.e. practical information services as a cultural technique
- the thesis that the document is any indexable object that can be evidence of some knowledge.

In recent years, the interest in the **cultural dimension of information science** has grown noticeably; it is understood just as Briet understood the documentation as a cultural technique (concepts of information and knowledge spaces, concepts of information management in particular domains and in individual practices).

However, it should be noted, however, that in these studies of the cultural dimension of information science references to Briet's work is mediated, primarily from the work of Michelle Buckland (1997, 2012).

# Briet's concept and the concept of integration of GLAM services in modern information science

The intriguing issue is the aforementioned little interest in integrating information services in the field of cultural heritage in Poland, which took the form of **dynamic GLAM movement** in the world.

This movement can be treated as the embodiment of one of Briet's main ideas about **integrating activities of various institutions and professional communities dealing with the documentation and dissemination of human knowledge**.

For Briet justification for the need for such integration is both a broad understanding of the document as a type of evidence in material or semiotic form, and the conviction that the development of documentation is the result of the social need associated with the development of a new type of society – today we could say that Briet **anticipated the emergence of information society**.

One of the arguments against such integration is the opinion about the low usefulness of indexing techniques for organizing access to knowledge stored in museums or exhibited in galleries. Museologists and art. historians prefer analytical descriptions that interpret a particular object in the light of historical knowledge.

Such doubts and objections can be solved by **new techniques developed in the digital humanities** (e.g. semantic annotations).

# 7. Conclusions

- i. The results of the presented analyzes show a great interest in Poland, first of all in the ideas of Paul Otlet, whose publications were commented and quoted by the most influential Polish researchers already in the interwar period.
- ii. Also after the war Otlet's ideas were analyzed in works on bibliography theory and the establishment of epistemological concepts of documentation and information science and the assumptions of organized information services.
- iii. There were indicated correspondence between Otlet's conception of documentology as a science of broadly understood books and bibliology, which was treated in Poland as a discipline, included comprehensive studies of the phenomenon of the book in various forms and its social functioning.
- iv. Unlike the apparently visible influence of Otlet's work on the development of documentation and information science in Poland, the reception of Suzanne Briet's work is rather small.
- v. Recently, however, interest in the cultural determinants of information science has increased, and research conducted in this respect indirectly refers to Briet's concept of documentation as a cultural technique and cultural activity.

## 7. Conclusions (cont.)

- vi. Information science in Poland is perceived primarily as a humanistic and social practical science, which main goal is to improve practical information services. Such an approach to the discipline involves acceptance of mostly positivist epistemology. Paul Otlet for this kind of research in information science is a central figure - in Polish literature never forgotten.
- vii. The rejection of the positivist tradition by a part of the information science community became visible in Poland quite late, in the 1990s, when the need for in-depth analysis of the social and humanistic conditions of the information services and their social reception began to grow stronger.
- viii. To some extent, in recent years in this research trend, references to works by Suzanne Briet have been noted, especially in the reflection on the cultural dimension of information science.
- ix. Paradoxically, **the turn towards phenomenological epistemology favors the development of ever more powerful computer information technology**. Increasingly, it enables the realization of the positivist idea of ensuring universal and rapid access to knowledge resources by means of a universal tool, which, thanks to its immense flexibility and the increasing semantic power simultaneously enables the use of ever more in-depth knowledge on diverse and individual interpretation of information objects (documents), dependent on diverse contexts and purposes of their use.

Thank you for your attention!

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