

Paul Otlet [1903] on the Organization of Knowledge

Excerpt from Otlet /1990/, 74-75).

Otlet, Paul. 1990. "The Science of Bibliography and Documentation." In *International Organisation and Dissemination of Knowledge: Selected Essays of Paul Otlet*. Translated and Edited with an Introduction by W. Boyd Rayward. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Elsevier, 71-86. Full book available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/4814091.pdf>. (Original article: "Les Sciences bibliographiques et la documentation". *IIB Bulletin* 8 (1903): 125-147).

Documentation should be distinguished with no less care from the *Organization of Knowledge*. This imprecise expression, which it is convenient to use in the absence of a unique term with a definite meaning, is here applied to the whole of the facts and considerations which are involved in the life and external organisation of knowledge itself, everything that has risen from creating it, preserving it, teaching it, disseminating it.

Knowledge has been defined as "the systematization of what is known on a given subject." The unity and inter-dependence of individual branches of knowledge have been recognised. A characteristic of universality through time and internationalism across countries has been proclaimed. As a corollary of these fundamental characteristics of human knowledge, it has been necessary to create an intellectual machinery for the simultaneous and continuous development of knowledge, to make effective the co-operation of scholars of different generations and of different countries and also to make general syntheses possible concurrently with analytical studies, to ensure that the progress of specialities keeps in step with the development of whole disciplines.

Following ever more detailed plans that reflect recent developments more effectively, we have witnessed each branch of knowledge organising itself separately at first, then we have seen organisations common to several areas emerge. What has been done, what exists today and what is projected in this area are considerable. To discuss this here would mean writing a treatise about the organisation of knowledge as a special discipline which in the future ought to be regarded as such. It would be analogous with respect to their external characteristics to general philosophy with respect to their internal conditions.

Let it suffice here to list some of the chapters of this treatise by mentioning some of the issues common to all branches of knowledge, or, to be more exact, the issues presented by each of them.

Because any subject is susceptible in principle of becoming a discipline or branch of systematized knowledge, all that is needed is for a certain number of persons to be sufficiently interested in its investigation for them to organise themselves for co-operation in research. Whereupon a scientific society is born which has these studies as its particular goal.

When societies having similar goals have been created in this way in different countries, they usually join to form an international association or institution which organises congresses or periodic meetings. Nearly all of these societies publish a *Bulletin* or *Proceedings* which they exchange with each other. These publications fulfil the double aim of making the work of their members known to others and, by providing an analysis of the work of those belonging to other associations, of keeping their members abreast of the general development of the discipline. Next, the "Year-book" of the discipline is born; that is to say, a compendium of general information on the subject it is concerned with and the names and addresses of persons and institutions dealing with it. The preparation of the special *Bibliography* of the field begins at the same time. This is sometimes published periodically in each of the *Bulletins*, sometimes collected and published as a whole in the *Year-book* or in a special publication. It is often taken up as a task by one of the societies in the group of those dealing with a particular field or by the international association that they have formed together.

Congresses devote themselves to the discussion of scientific problems in the field, matters on which no vote is taken. Congresses also discuss the organisation of work and this does become the object of decisions and resolutions. What is involved here, indeed, is organisation and administration, an area where convention (rather than free scientific enquiry) plays the major role. Thus, scientific congresses deal with the standardisation and generalization of such matters as measurement, methods, apparatus and instruments, terminology and classification. They also discuss, support or undertake research requiring extensive co-operation and collective publications whose aim is the co-ordination of a great deal of information or a great many documents. This research and these publications could not possibly be undertaken by individual initiative alone.

The teaching of a discipline at all levels is also a matter for the Organisation of Knowledge: special professorships, practical courses and seminars, popular lectures, research institutes, and all the ways of encouraging the study of a science: competitions, study scholarships, travel scholarships, etc.

Finally, with all its faltering, its questioning, its observations, its discoveries, its discussions, its plans whether completed or just being formulated, knowledge taken as a whole produces as it unfolds thousands and thousands of graphic documents, principally books and journal articles. Dealing with these is of great concern to the Organisation of Knowledge: the composition and editing of works, their physical production, their preservation in libraries, listing and indexing them in bibliographical and reviewing publications, etc.

Such are the various subjects related to the *Organization of Knowledge* and which are studied in a comparative way. It is not limited to the examination of a particular discipline. Its investigations involve different disciplines, each of which is examined for what it has done best in these various areas. This is brought to the attention of specialists in other disciplines, and thus, gradually, a typical organisational structure is determined on the model of which in the future all new knowledge can be built.

As one has just seen, everything which deals with scientific documentation, can, in the final analysis, be considered as a branch of the organisation of knowledge. Nevertheless, because of its importance it is advisable to make this branch of study, like teaching, an independent and self-contained subject.

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