Considerations on the Social Role of the Document According to Paul Otlet

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ABSTRACT
This study assesses Paul Otlet’s (1868-1944) understanding of the social role of the document. Specifically, it explores why he considers documents as essential elements for the ordering of social relations. In order to do so, it examines Otlet’s expositions on the nature of the social dynamics, and contrasts them with his descriptions of the document and its functions in the social sphere. It observes Otlet’s claims for the book as an instrument of social improvement, noticing how they were emphasized by the circumstances of both the First World War and the interwar period. It analyzes the analogies he employs to describe society and project its future and how they reflected internationalist assumptions, and notices how his arguments for the importance of the book draw heavily from it. The article argues that contemporary Information Science still needs to fully consider the element of internationalism in Otlet’s construction of documentation, particularly in how it relates to social cooperation, collaboration and connection.

Keywords
Paul Otlet; Document; Internationalism.

INTRODUCTION
Much has already been said on Paul Otlet’s (1868-1944) ideas regarding the document and its centrality to his overall work. Studies on this matter and other closely aligned subjects, such as Buckland’s (1990, 1991a, 1991b) and Rayward’s (1994, 1997), have contributed to the emergence of the neodocumentalist movement (Lund & Buckland, 2008), and have fostered reflections on current information issues brought about by technological and social change such as information visualization, hypertext, the World Wide Web and the treatment of new media (Rayward, 1994; Van Acker, 2011; Van den Heuvel, 2008; Van den Heuvel & Rayward, 2011; to cite a few).

Of all of the recent evaluations of Otlet’s conception of the book-document, perhaps it is Day’s (1997) that has been considered somewhat “controversial” as far as it concerns his challenge to the broadly accepted understanding of Otlet’s concepts as positivistic. While the element of positivism in Otlet’s work has generated considerable discussion and is in itself a topic worth addressing, what I want to highlight is, apart from this debate, the particular way in which Day frames the document as the central object for the development of his argument.

Day particularly expresses (1997, p. 310, 316; 2001, p. 10, 12) the importance of allowing for the broader context addressed by Otlet when analyzing the otletian conceptualization of the book. Day ascertains this context chiefly to Otlet’s internationalism, and argues that, considering such ends of world peace and international cooperation as he championed, his constructs and prescriptions on the document should not be regarded simply as techno-practical innovations and solutions. According to Day, Otlet’s very style of writing, abundant in metaphors and hyperboles that create image after image of how mankind’s future could and should look like, is expressive of his broader social and political views. Day’s approach (2001, p. 12) thus points to an understanding of Otlet’s document rooted in social concerns that include but surpass technical problem-solving and issues of

1 For the purposes of this paper, the expressions “book”, “document”, and “book-document” are used interchangeably to refer to Documentation’s object of study, in the overall fashion of Otlet (1934) himself.

2 Day’s 1997 work particularly addresses and challenges Rayward’s (1994) affirmation that Otlet’s deconstruction of the document is firmly rooted in a nineteenth-century positivism paradigm, and therefore it should be noted that the choice of the book-document as the central object of Day’s argument is also inextricably linked to the nature of the argument he wishes to refute. For some responses, see Ducheyne (2006; 2009, p. 229-230) and Frohmann (2004, p. 263-264).
professional practice, establishing a deep connection between the book and the future of human life and society.

Drawing on these observations of Day, this paper proposes to contribute to the studies on Otlet’s document by assessing Otlet’s understanding of the social role of the document in the internationalized society he perceived his contemporary world had become. Otlet’s claims for the social significance of the document’s role are, as Day puts it (2001, p. 12), “deafening”, due to the repetition and the multiplication of examples and metaphors which are intended by Otlet to have the force of argument.

The aim is to observe how Otlet frames the question of the book within the workings of the society at large, in order to answer adequately to the question of why he considers the book an essential element for the ordering of social relations. In this I also follow Rieusset-Lemarié’s consideration (1997, p. 301) of early 20th century internationalism as a non-negligible reference for the adequate appraisal of the consistency of Otlet’s work, for I intend to observe the internationalist element in Otlet’s thought through the exposition of his understanding of social dynamics.

The method of analysis examines Otlet’s claims regarding the document’s place and functions in the social sphere in light of his observations on the nature of social conflict, cooperation and development. Otlet’s statements on the social aspects of the document are drawn from his scientific laws of the book in the Traité de documentation (1934), as well as the connections he established throughout chapters 1 and 5 between sociology and documentation. For his observations on the social phenomenon, I refer mainly but not exclusively to topic 23 of Les problèmes internationaux et la guerre (1916), which deals with the social factors of international life, and selected excerpts of topic 13 La Société of Monde (1935). A letter of Otlet’s translated by Rayward ([1915] 1990) is also cited in order to discuss internationalism’s understanding of peace.

It must be noted that the analytical scope of this article is limited to Otlet’s own text, and therefore the extent of this study is that of a reading, albeit a critical one, of Otlet’s construction of the document in relation to his conceptions of society. It is my hope that, even within the limitations imposed by this approach, the elements exposed in this article may contribute to current discussions of Information Science by offering a richer perspective of the element of international social cooperation, collaboration and connection which characterized Otlet’s internationalist view of documentation, and therefore contributing to a more thoroughly understanding of Otlet’s heritage to the field.

THE BOOK AS SOCIAL INSTRUMENT
In the last chapter of his Traité de documentation, Otlet attempted the elaboration of an assortment of scientific laws pertaining to the book: general, “universal” laws; derivations of propositions from other sciences; and statements that were specific to the document as an object of observation and study.

This last group of laws was developed from Otlet’s axiom (1934, p. 425-426) that the document constituted a “new reality” by materializing the content of man’s thoughts regarding himself and his surroundings. The book was therefore seen as a “double” both of the external reality and of man’s internal world. According to Otlet this “double” became progressively detached from its source in the sense that it ceased to be only a product of human creation, and grew into an element capable of acting upon man himself and upon the reality it originally represented.

From this fundamental observations, Otlet addressed (1934, p. 426-427) the book’s role in social relations, stating that it performed as an “instrument of social unity, liberty and equality”. He identified documentation’s process of doubling the world as part of a broader mechanism, “the cycle of social operations”, which resulted in the production not only of documents but also of “material objects” and “institutions”. Much like the book, objects and institutions were human elaborations that interfered in the wider world, becoming new elements of reality for man to think, act and create upon; however, they differed from the document inasmuch as they did not represent reality, only became part of it.

Being the only thing apart from man’s mind that could represent reality and ideas, the book “intervened” in man’s very thought and expression, and occupied therefore a unique position in the cycle of social operations. It worked as a bridge between individual human minds, and also between the mind and the outside world. While speech also fulfilled those requirements, it lacked the book’s capacity for materializing and fixing thought, which enabled the document to make “intellectual goods” “unlimited” by turning them permanent, accessible and multiplicable in a way that ordinary material goods could not be. The joint result of the book’s conceptual nature as a double of the world and its technical aspect as a means for preservation and dissemination lied in the document’s social role, its ability for “changing the conditions of individual existence and of the social bond between individuals” (Otlet, 1934, p. 427).

Otlet’s understanding of the book as a social instrument stated (1934, p. 426) that society was founded either “on mutualism or parasitism”, depending on how resources were managed and human relations established, and that the peculiar character of the document as “a machine producing speeches and images […] a machine reproducing reality” turned it into a privileged means to promote social balance. From this observation he went on to affirm that “the Book-Document is then in the very heart of the social battle; it is an ally of first importance for winning or losing it” (Otlet, 1934, p. 427).

Otlet strongly believed that the proliferation of conflicts in his age only evidenced this fact the more urgently.
According to him (1934, p. 427), “our times give to the social a rank and a place that it has never known in previous stages of civilization. Our times are those of war, of revolution, of crisis, three great evils that hit every individual, and against which isolated one can do nothing”. The experience of concentrated efforts and resources that the First World War provided had shown mankind how much could be achieved through the union and subordination of individual will to collective, unified endeavors, but there loomed the shadow of totalitarianism and its dangers, such as censorship, “mental submission” and “every type of imposed life”. On the other hand, the opposite tendency towards “hyper separatism” (Otlet, 1935, p. 388) was no better a path towards peace, depriving men of the advantages of order, security and economy provided by a unified plan in an attempt to preserve intellectual freedom (Otlet, 1934, p. 427).

Otlet was aware (1934, p. 437) of the role that the book could perform in such a situation, and how much it could be used to promote either of these scenarios; so much so that he affirmed that documents were “unable to be socially indifferent things”, and “by their very existence, [they] help or hinder” social life. Otlet believed, however, in the possibility and desirability of a third alternative: “conciliation and synthesis” by the conjoint means of the book and voluntary, positive human action, affirming man’s natural inclination to goodness, beauty and truth. By engaging these built-in positive tendencies and mobilizing the unlimited resources made possible by the document, Otlet asserted that mankind would certainly be able to conciliate social conflicts through unified, collective plans without veering towards violence and domination of others.

GROWTH, CRISIS, AND THE NATURE OF SOCIAL LIFE

Otlet’s characterization of the book as a social instrument examined above expresses an understanding of social life as essentially characterized by conflict: society is built up on either mutualism or parasitism; social development is deemed the social battle; the main alternatives of course presented are fundamentally opposed to one another. As Day notices (1997, p. 316), Otlet’s observations are tinged with the bitter experience of “the failure of internationalism during the First World War”: it must be noticed that the peace treaties signed at the end of the War were very much in contradiction with the positions defended by Otlet, imposing the particular interests of the victorious states over the defeated nations, neglecting the arguments of the neutral countries, and overall establishing the League of Nations over too fragile grounds. His evaluation of the dangers of underestimating “the conduct of peace” proved true: “peace becomes unjust and unstable, a very starting point to new wars” (Otlet, 1916, p. 36-37).

Otlet’s dreams of a peaceful future for mankind may certainly sound elusive, utopian and/or excessively optimistic to both his contemporaries and modern readers. However, it must be noted that for all its shaky or questionable stances, Otlet’s position did not disregard how much conflict and dispute were integral elements to social life. As he once made a point to clarify, “I am an internationalist. I add that I am not a pacifist. The distinction, which is not always made, is real” (Otlet, 1915 1990, p. 130-131), and lies in their divergent understandings on what constitutes desirable peace. While both internationalism and pacifism aimed for peace, the pacifist’s desire or “sentiment” was so heightened that he deemed “any price” should be paid and any peace should be welcomed. Internationalists, however, strived for “lasting peace”, whose stability could only be based on the understanding of the “sociological causes” that generated conflict, followed by the international organization of social relations.

He described (1916, p. 141-142) the dynamics of conflict in his analysis of the “modes of social action”, which he summed up in two pairs of opposite forces: “organization and anarchy”, and “cooperation and struggle”:

There are in society two great movements analogous to those of cosmic nature, a force that separates: struggle, competition, rivalries, war (centrifugal force); and one that unites: association, cooperation, organization, peace (centripetal force). All that exists is, in both the social world and the physical world, the ephemeral, transitory result of these two forces. (Otlet, 1916, p. 141-142).

Otlet stated (1934, p. 427) that human individual disposition was naturally directed to positive tendencies: it “operates irresistibly by the very psychic and interior force, without any intervention of the exterior material force”. In social groupings, however, other factors were at play, and the inclination towards struggle could be as strong as the one towards peace. It is noticeable that the tendency for conflict in social life can be identified in the very existence of oppositional forces working simultaneously (one could even say “battling each other”), making it therefore a structural aspect of society and the universe itself.

Far from suggesting therefore the elimination of social disputes as a possibility, Otlet stated (1916, p. 426; [1916] 1990, p. 140) that the purpose of international organization was “certainly not [to] put an end to struggles and conflicts. They are the very essence of life itself. But they would be transformed, as internal conflicts have been” (emphasis added). Otlet believed (1916, p. 33) in the possibility of “neutralizing the effects” of war just as it had already been possible to control and neutralize the results of other damaging social phenomena like slavery, absolutism, torture and female submission. Recognizing the natural propensities for social conflict was not therefore an excuse for inaction: much on the contrary, it was an identification of sociological causes that should function as a starting point for action.
Otlet considered (1916, p. 11-12, 144) that inaction lead to “anarchy”, by which he meant the neglect of social developments to their own devices and the exemption of responsibility regarding the outcomes. Anarchy thus fostered the violent centrifugal effects of social life, while its opposite, organization, strengthened society’s centripetal inclinations. Otlet claimed that organization not only favored action over inaction, but was meant to turn it into intentional, purposeful action: “all organization”, he stated (1916, p. 144), “repose in short on three terms: knowledge, anticipation, willingness”. Thus organization implied essentially in the process of planning: gathering and sorting knowledge, preparing resources, projecting outcomes, and willing to go through with the necessary efforts.

While social organization demanded willful human initiative, Otlet argued it also followed a natural pattern. It not only acknowledged and built upon an intrinsic (natural) social force, but mimicked nature’s example: he affirmed (1916, p. 144-145) that “organization has its prototype in nature”, in the way cells and body parts acted together coordinately to ensure the life of an organ or being. Otlet also claimed (1934, p. 423) that organization was a law of the biological world, according to which all living elements were bound by relations of interdependence. Otlet understood that social life worked much in this same way, with interdependence becoming either an advantage (mutualism) or a liability (parasitism) in response to the surrounding conditions.

Evolution was another aspect of social organization conveyed by the metaphors of mutualism and parasitism, particularly regarding the need for adaptation. Otlet affirmed (1916, p. 112-113) that “a society is well adapted when the collective services (that are analogous to functions) and the institutions (that are analogous to organs) are arranged in order to achieve the optimal conditions”. The failure to adjust accordingly resulted in crisis, such as the one mankind was currently witnessing in the First World War.

Otlet observed ([1915] 1990, p. 130) that, due to the combination of scientific and technological development with demographic increase, social life had long before the War expanded beyond the cultural and geographical borders defined by the states and their traditional alliances. The result was the emergence of “international life” or “world life”, a new phase in social development marked by “growing solidarity and interdependence regarding the great subjects, the great questions of the world” (Otlet, 1916, p. 36). Such growth necessarily involved an equivalent need for increased organization.

Rieusset-Lemarié notices (1997, p. 302) that “in Otlet’s scheme, solidarity is not a humanistic wish but a structural necessity”, the only adequate response to the very material demands of social interdependence. She stresses, however, that he rejected the resource to constraint as an answer, for it would foster the “worst consequences: violence and disaster” instead of the desired order and organization. Rieusset-Lemarié’s observations emphasize Otlet’s belief that true cooperation can only be obtained by the essentially positive character of voluntary actions, in contrast with the nefarious effects of the use of force, a feature of his thought she considers “radically […] truly democratic” (Rieusset-Lemarié, 1997, p. 303).

The “crisis of growth” (Otlet, 1916, p. 36) or “crisis of adaptation” (Otlet, 1935, p. 113) that Otlet perceived in his contemporary society could therefore only be countered by the deliberate involvement of the interested parties – both states and civil society – in order to furnish international life with the necessary structure to keep it alive and blooming. He maintained that the full realization of the promising fertility and productivity of international life required that the natural, spontaneous course of social evolution would be directed and oriented by social organization.

Rieusset-Lemarié addresses (1997, p. 302-303) this apparent dichotomy between international life as a natural phenomenon and human intervention as an imperative necessity, stating that, according to Otlet, “whereas life is a negentropic phenomenon, international interdependence runs the risk of being entropic unless the rational organization of information manages to produce another kind of negentropic process”. Life therefore should be understood as a phenomenon mainly associated with the centripetal forces of association, cooperation, organization and peace, which improved order and efficiency. Grown to an international scale, however, life was threatened to be engulfed by centrifugal forces due to its sheer dimensions; the very idea of growth involved the widening of the distance between center and periphery. Thus international life demanded the reinforcement of organizational measures in order to balance the centrifugal tendencies.

Another factor that illuminates the contradiction in Otlet’s biological model are his own observations regarding his use of metaphors to express social structure and dynamics:

Assuredly, these are only comparisons, analogies, but they have their value. Less for what is necessary to explain, perhaps, than for what is necessary to create. Indeed, the more we have types of structure, - for example animal organization, the machine, a scholarly society, an industrial enterprise, […] – the more our constructive imagination has models it can borrow for its own creations. This is of major interest for the problem at hand: the structure of international life. (Otlet, 1916, p. 103; 1935, p. 109).

Otlet proposed that the metaphors be understood as models that could provide insight not only on how society works, but how it could be transformed and improved. By deploying the parallels and differences between known structures and the organization and dynamics of social life, Otlet believed it would be possible to better understand the
nature and the problems of society and improve their identification and solutions. His emphasis on the advantage of having multiple referential structures with which to fuel constructive imagination allows for the association between different metaphors in order to better represent social life.

Thus, while as a structure organization had its prototype in nature’s organism, the planning, resourcing and executing aspect of organization associated society more closely to the image of engineering and machinery. Otlet described that, like a machine, society yielded different results conditionally to its configuration, being therefore responsive to adjustments and modifications; in this vein, “man ought to create institutions that should be to human forces what machines are to natural forces” (Otlet, 1916, p. 115). He also stated (1916, p. 53) the need for “social inventors and engineers”, that could “create institutions and organization as one creates machines, imagining first of all a plan that combines the elements available in view of achieving a useful goal”. However, Otlet made a point to notice a fundamental difference between technical and social developments: social “engineering” could not be done “arbitrarily”, “at once” like the designing of machinery, for any given social structure was dependent on its preceding forms. In this angle, social organization was better understood by the evolutionary light shod by the biological metaphor, and technical construction could not model its action, only “inspire” it (Otlet, 1916, p. 103-104; 1935, p. 109-110).

Another of Otlet’s models for society was that of “unions of intelligence”, which was partially molded after the process of scientific development (Otlet, 1916, p. 103-104, 148; 1935, p. 109-110). Otlet stated that it was becoming increasingly viable for social relations to be less strictly dependent on material needs, geographical accidents, or traditions from the past, and more on shared ideas and voluntary cooperation towards common “higher” goals. This belief relied on the conviction that human communication and expression were continuously progressing, and on the principle that “conscious intelligence” was the defining characteristic that distinguished man from other living beings.

In Otlet’s view, the unions of intelligence were both a vision for an attainable future and a metaphor to understand and transform the current state of affairs that characterized international life, alongside the organism and the machinery. The model of the unions was meant to express the role of intellectual elements, such as ideas, education, knowledge and reasoning, in the dynamics of social structure, highlighting Otlet’s continual emphasis on voluntary, deliberate human action as the defining element of social relations. In the “unions of intelligence” the social bond was no longer based on survival (organism) or functioning (machine), but aligned more closely to will and consciousness, which were qualities unique to man. As much as both the nature’s prototype and the inspiration of the machinery process could provide society with structural references and fuel the creation of organizational solutions, actual social organization had to ensure the proper consideration and articulation of the particularly human aspects of social relations.

**A PRIVILEGED MEANS FOR PEACEMAKING: THE DOCUMENT AND THE SOCIAL BODY**

Otlet’s belief in conscious intelligence as an essential factor in the development of society was continuously reiterated in his texts. He regarded (Otlet, 1916, p. 126) ideas as “motors of social action”, alongside instinct, will, habits and standards of conduct, feelings, and ideals, and stated that “in the sociological realm, the ruling ideas have capital importance. They are what manifest or determine men’s activity. It is by the means of the idea that social acts should be done and are done”. Ideas were representations received or developed by the mind, which then by means of communication were “put in circulation” in society and became progressively capable of directing human development, both in its moral and material aspects.

This was in fact an essential assumption behind the assessment of the book as social instrument, the axiom of documents as a new reality and the bibliological laws. It was only due to the social importance of representation that the book’s ability to materialize it and perform as a double of the world was of any social consequence.

Otlet (1934, p. 106) conceived the document as being composed of two distinguishable parts. The first, the “content” or “substance”, corresponded to the “scientific or literary elements, the very data of the exposition”. The second, the “continent” or “form”, comprehended the physical, graphic, linguistic and intellectual characteristics of the document, that is, everything that made up the book but could not be strictly considered as “facts and ideas”. All the elements of the continent mattered to the performance of the document’s social role, due to their effects on the expression and communication of the content it was meant to convey; this, however, was the extent of their importance.

Nowhere was this articulated more clearly then when Otlet defined the two fundamental problems to be addressed by a science of documentation:

> Given the books produced throughout the ages and that will continue to be published, which characteristics – material, graphic and intellectual – do they present and how these diverse elements are capable to express intellectual data?

> Conversely, given intellectual data, which material, graphic and intellectual elements are the most appropriate to their bibliological and documentary expression? (Otlet, 1934, p. 25).

While the form elements were the factors in which studies of the document were meant to interfere directly, all of its efforts were directed toward making intellectual data, i.e.,
Otlet further examined the importance of ideas for an adequate understanding of both society and the book by analyzing the rapport between sociology’s findings and laws and the new field of documentation. According to him, Society is a tissue of “inter-spiritual” action, of mental states acting upon one another. It is an inter-mental agreement, a mental connection, a group of judgments and designs that contradicts or antagonizes one another the least possible, that confirms or assists one another as much as possible. Society thus is a system that differs from a philosophical system, in that the mental states of which it is composed are dispersed between a great number of distinct brains instead of being gathered inside the same brain. The book is the means to regulate, generalize, amplify these spiritual actions. (Otlet, 1934, p. 424).

To clarify and highlight the social action of the document, Otlet reduced the social bond between men solely to the aspect of mental states, adopting the perspective of society as made up of unions of conscious intelligence. The material aspects of social relations were assumed as subjected to the establishment of agreement and connection between grouped individual minds, thus highlighting the fact that all motors of social action were primarily matters of the spirit (mind or consciousness), and that mental judgments and designs were the source and moving force of social action.

The essentially spiritual or mental character of the social bond meant however that the reciprocal action among of mental states should be mainly a positive one, of confirmation and assistance, in order to achieve actual agreement. Ideas had therefore not only to be put in circulation but to be directed as much as possible towards consensus. A union of intelligence, after all, supposes not only gathering and grouping, but some level of like-mindedness.

Thus while Otlet blamed (1916, p. 127, 129-130) ignorance as a major source of misunderstanding between peoples, he still affirmed that, although extremely valuable and desirable, awareness and knowledge of “collective mental states” were insufficient. The outbreak of the Great War was partially due to “imperfectly coordinated” public opinion, an example of the undesirable antagonism of minds, and it was necessary to organize the ideas that circulated in society so that a “universal public opinion” could be attained. The successful achievement of the lasting peace awaited by internationalist efforts depended on the existence of a public opinion that knew “what [peace] actually means” (Otlet, 1916, p. 484; [1916] 1990, p. 143). People needed to be made aware both of the general sociological causes of conflict, and the specific factors that lead to this particular war. He stated thusly:

What is required is the creation in the masses of an attitude of mind, a clear understanding of the process that has caught them up, of the machinery in which they have functioned as parts. We can hope for the best only if we can rely upon a body of opinion ready to accept the great transformations that are necessary. (Otlet, 1916, p. 484-485; [1916] 1990, p. 143).

Commenting the passage above, Rieusset-Lemarié notices (1997, p. 302) how Otlet employs his analogies of society opposing the language of machinery to the language of biology, and giving subtle preference to the later. According to her, he countered the character of life and activity to the passivity of mechanical elements, stressing that “the masses must not be the parts of an unintelligent machinery but the active organs of a body of opinion” (Rieusset-Lemarié, 1997, p. 302, emphasis original). Machines turned on and shut down according to external commands and devices, while organs responded both to external stimuli and to the body’s own, intrinsic search for chemical balance, yielding life to the body itself. Likewise, the masses had to become capable to recognize the workings of the social phenomena in which they were immersed and address them deliberately, instead of just suffering their consequences.

The need for the social body to actively work for its own organization depicted public opinion as a collective engagement, one that demanded the intellectual involvment of the masses. It pointed therefore once again to the irreplaceable character of conscious human will in the development of society:

Every citizen has his responsibility; he must be led to act. Among the numerous and confusing ideas, he must be made capable of clarifying and choosing among them. He must exert himself to action and leave the chaos were he thrashes. […] It is not enough that men, groups, organizations may work to clear up and say what must be done. It is the mass of citizens that must be reached. Their information is needed, so that warned, they might assert and compel to forward realization. All of this enlightens the role of Documentation in Society. (Otlet, 1934, p. 30).

In order to assume their responsibility in social life, masses would no longer be considered as shapeless groupings, but instead as collectives of citizens, from whom action was expected and to whom means to decide must be provided. Hence, their information represented the conditional element that differentiated a fully capable and acting member of society from a number in population count.

Very early in his work, Otlet defined ([1903] 1990, p. 77) the ability to furnish information as the parameter by which
objects were identified as documents. His later elaborations of laws and axioms did not contradict this statement, and instead built upon its implications, both technical and social. Here, therefore, lied the book’s ability to act as an instrument of social unity, liberty and equality, one that could actually change human condition individually and collectively (Otlet, 1934, p. 425, 427): by making it possible for men to be informed, the document endowed them with the resources to exert their power of choice and action in the social group. Otlet argued this benefited individuals and society alike, for the development of the innate positive tendencies of individuals resulted in the improvement of their social bonds, thus reinforcing the centripetal forces in social balance and the overall cohesion of society.

Furthermore, the book made possible for all these individual mental states that composed society to work as a single, unified brain, strengthening the organization of the social body by acting upon its central, commanding organ to which all other actions were subjected. The association between this mental metaphor for society and Otlet’s understanding (1934, p. 30, 425) of the book as an exteriorized evolution of the human brain are too blatant to ignore, so much so that Otlet himself did not measure words to make the implied connection explicit, affirming that “improving the book is improving civilization […] Perfectioning the book is perfecting Mankind” (Otlet, 1934, p. 30).

Of all of man’s creations, the document was the privileged means for social organization for by its very nature it was anchored in the existence, representation and dissemination of the essential and defining human factor of thought and reasoning, making possible therefore to socially unite men by the most intrinsically human of bonds that were ideas, consciousness and reason.

CONCLUSION
As this meeting gathers under the banner of “Connecting Collections, Cultures and Communities”, it sparks the reflection on how our understanding of these factors have influenced both the means and the ends of contemporary and historical information work.

In Otlet’s framework for Documentation, the connection of individuals, associations and nations was the very foundation upon which all his propositions laid, and all technical and organizational measures he developed were meant to contribute to its establishment and improvement. Otlet’s internationalist beliefs informed his understandings of how society worked and developed itself, and consequently shaped the alternatives he anticipated for social progress.

Continual growth and expansion towards universality were considered the intrinsic, natural tendencies of social relations, which had reached their highest level with the internationalization of the world. The deliberate ordering of this originally spontaneous phenomenon was the overall remedy proposed by Otlet in order to provide that the mere extension and multiplication of contacts could become meaningful, deliberate human connections, and thus foster cooperation. Otlet argued and expressed this position by employing several organizational metaphors and models in the attempt to describe and project social possibilities: the natural and organically adapted structure of the body or organism, the adjustable and productive system of machinery, and the intrinsically human bonds made possible by the development and communication of ideas and thought.

Thought being the very substance which the document fixed and materialized, the document was therefore considered by Otlet as a masterful, unparalleled resource for the achievement of the democratic ideal of consensus-based social unity. The formation of agreements demanded an awareness of reality that in an increasingly internationalized society could only be provided by the document’s performance as a carrier of ideas.

The centrality of the book as a problematic in Otlet’s work can thus be understood as in direct correlation to the dynamics of the society at large, for its importance lied on the prior assumption of ideas as the most important forces of social action. Otlet’s social role for the document was therefore a consequence of his belief that social bonds should be progressively based on voluntary human action and on the establishment of social accord, instead of just being a byproduct of survival, functionality or constraint. It could be stated therefore that in Otlet’s scheme the document was an element of major political importance, for its high rank of social consequence was a direct byproduct of his dearly held internationalist views.

As historical studies of Information Science start to mature and multiply and the field rediscovers and reassesses a growing number of its historical figures, the need to consider both the common grounds and the particularities of these individuals and their work rises accordingly. In Otlet’s particular case, I believe that there is still need to fully consider how the element of internationalism played out in his designs for Documentation. I hope thus that this brief analysis of Otlet’s conception of the document in the broader frame of society may be a contribution to its advancement.

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