The Reception of Suzanne Briet in the United States
by Michael K. Buckland


EDITOR'S SUMMARY
A library pioneer of the mid-20th century, Suzanne Briet was a driving force in expanding and modernizing library service and early information science in France. She is most well known for insightful writings on the concepts of bibliography and of documents and documentation. Despite international connections, Briet's writings, almost exclusively in French, received little recognition in the United States during her lifetime. One influential commentator's review suggested misunderstanding of her key ideas. But historical interest in information science, largely from within ASIS&T, and translation and online distribution of her seminal writings have renewed scholarly interest in Briet's work and established a place for her among notable information scientists.

KEYWORDS
information science history
scholars
librarianship
information scientists
France

Suzanne Briet (1894–1989) was one of a small group of women who did much to transform library service in France in the mid-20th century [1] [2]. Her principal professional achievements were to establish reference service at the French National Library and to be director of studies for an early iSchool, the National Institute for Documentation Techniques in Paris. She also contributed substantially through multiple professional organizations before she retired in 1960 and turned to historical and literary studies [3, pp. 1-7, 65-69] [4] [5].

When she died 30 years later, she and her contributions to library and information science had been thoroughly forgotten. Yet now, after another 30 years, she is widely known for her forceful manifesto Qu’est-ce que la documentation? (What is documentation?), with its argument that bibliography is really about access to evidence and that what constitutes evidence (documents) can take many forms, even an antelope [6] [3].

Briet was known personally to individual Americans active in international organizations (FID, IFLA, UNESCO) or to those she met during her tour of the United States in 1951-52. She wrote extensively in French, but apart from English translations of UNESCO documents, only one, about bibliographies in the Bibliothèque Nationale, appeared in English in the United States [7], although when Briet visited the Library of Congress, a sympathetic review of her manifesto Qu’est ce que la documentation appeared in the LC Information Bulletin [8].

Documents, for Briet, are things that document (verb!), regardless of their material form. Unfortunately, when the influential Jesse H. Shera summarized Briet’s ideas he wrote that her theory was “materialistic rather than functional” [9, p. 194]. This statement and his other dismissive comments indicate he...
had misunderstood Briet’s argument. Briet’s extensive writings on professional education and other topics were presumably known to specialists capable of reading French, but no evidence of any impact by Briet is evident.

Later Briet became known in the United States, primarily through Mary Maack [1] [10] and also Buckland [4], as a leader in the modernization of librarianship in France and as a rare woman pioneer of information science. The editors of a special issue on women pioneers requested an article on her [2].

A new interest in the history and theory of information science developed during the 1990s, mainly through the activities of the Special Interest Group/History and Foundations of Information Science of the American Society for Information Science and Technology. Two related articles of mine from the 1990s that included Briet’s ideas, one more analytical (“Information as Thing”) [11] and one more historical (“What Is a ‘Document’?”) [12], were widely read by students in schools of library and information science. The idea that an antelope placed in a zoo (and in a taxonomy) could become a document stimulated students’ imaginations. T-shirts showing Briet’s antelope even became popular at three universities.

The extreme scarcity of copies of Qu’est ce que la documentation and the lack of an English translation impeded recognition of Briet. Fortunately, a careful English translation by Ron Day and Laurent Martinet now exists with commentary and bio-bibliographical material [3]. Both the French original and the English translation are now available online. The inclusion, now, of Briet’s ideas in the writings of Ron Day (for example, [13]) and others suggest that she is now established in the English-language discourse on information science.

Resources Mentioned in the Article


