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Organizing and disseminating knowledge
Theoretical and instrumental innovations of Paul Otlet

Keynote address abstract

Paul Otlet developed a complex theory of what may well be better called information management than knowledge organization, though the two are perhaps not easily distinguishable in his thinking. He was preoccupied with how one might conceptualise in an integrated way the processes of knowledge creation, expression in various artifactual or “documentary” modalites, their management institutionally and their restructuring and dissemination in new ways. What ideally was needed for providing access to a record becoming so voluminous, complex and multifaceted that it hid as much as it revealed?

This led Otlet to identify the new kinds of intellectual equipment and social arrangements for knowledge distribution and access, not merely a universal classification and a universal network, but new kinds of instruments for which he coined terms such as Studium Mundaneum, Museothèque and Mondothèque.

I trace the developments of Otlet’s ideas from bibliography through his enlarged concept of document and documentation to his attempts to envisage new organisational forms for knowledge management. I draw particularly on his struggles to visualize what he meant as represented in the drawings for the Encyclopedia Universalis Mundaneum.