

# Introduction

## Abstract

*In chapter 1 of Library Technology Reports (vol. 50, no. 7), “Social Media Curation,” the authors explore current definitions of the word curation inside and outside the library community and identify the practice of social media curation. The chapter shares professional rationale and offers an overview of current practice.*

*Curator: One who has the care or charge of a person or thing.*

—OED<sup>1</sup>

*First things first—“curation” is a terrible term. It has been used so frivolously and applied so indiscriminately that it’s become vacant of meaning. But I firmly believe that the ethos at its core—a drive to find the interesting, meaningful, and relevant amidst the vast maze of overabundant information, creating a framework for what matters in the world and why—is an increasingly valuable form of creative and intellectual labor, a form of authorship that warrants thought.*

—Maria Popova<sup>2</sup>

## What Is Curation?

Librarians have always curated. Today, as human filters, librarians address the proverbial Internet fire hose. With the added intensity of user-generated content, they direct the stream, offering context, pointing to value and authority, while protecting their communities, students, faculty, employees, and researchers from oversaturation.

Like Maria Popova, we are acutely aware that the term *curation* is loaded and that our profession includes curators who work in a variety of ways. We represent folks intensely serious about curation as a time-honored professional activity. We represent the growing number of professionals engaged in digital research data curation and digital curation of artifacts on huge national and international library portals. We also represent other professionals who leverage social media tools for immediate sharing and continual communication with their communities.

A segment of the library world curates with protocols and policies and serious and worthy concern for the quality of the content they select, for its authority and provenance, for the metadata with which they tag and increase accessibility and discoverability, and for the stories they tell with their selected items, artifacts, and media. Traditionally, offline, museum curators and archivists collect and carefully research, authenticate, and catalog art and artifacts. They select items for display. They sequence, assemble, organize, and present. They interpret their collections, offering their visitors context, and perhaps a story or experience, through descriptions they share on placards and plates and audio tours.

Data curation and digital curation are terms used by a growing number of professionals in both the library and museum worlds. The Digital Curation Centre (DCC) in the United Kingdom, creator of the Curation Reference Manual, defines digital curation and refers to the work of research data curators:

Digital curation involves maintaining, preserving and adding value to digital research data throughout its lifecycle.

...

As well as reducing duplication of effort in research data creation, curation enhances the long-term value of existing data by making it available for further high quality research.<sup>3</sup>

### *DCC Curation Reference Manual*

[www.dcc.ac.uk/resources/curation-reference-manual](http://www.dcc.ac.uk/resources/curation-reference-manual)

The term digital humanities (DH) emerged several years back. Major universities now have DH departments. The DH Curation Guide compiles articles that address data curation in the digital humanities and describes the activities of representation, archiving, authentication, management, preservation, retrieval, and use that comprise the efforts of data curators as they manage digital materials for research.<sup>4</sup>

Extending the formal digital curation approach, in many major curation projects, like the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), social media tools sit next to formally cataloged content. This inclusion complements formally cataloged content and opens it to conversation. Open API enriches existing assets by encouraging playful use—sharing, repurposing, and repackaging of items to meet local needs. For instance, the Library of Congress (LOC) promotes its curation efforts with its Twitter feed and Flickr photostream.

A growing segment of the library world wholeheartedly engages in social media curation, a less formal activity, now enthusiastically embraced by professionals outside our world. Business leaders and experts are emerging as well-known, trusted curators in their niche areas of expertise.

A growing segment of the library world is curating in the same style, recognizing the possibility that not all of the content we point to requires MARC or Dublin Core cataloging. Content is all around us. Collection is not always what we purchase from a publisher. It is also what we point to and make discoverable. Some of the content our communities need may be ephemeral in nature. Some of the most relevant content we can and should point to will be developed by members of our community. And so, a growing group of librarians embrace familiar social media platforms and user-generated content with their native interactivity, accompanying comments, conversations, and immediacy. They view curation as a quicker, less formal activity and are less concerned with duplication of effort and life cycle. They select, they add context, and they tag with folksonomies or locally relevant, on-the-fly terms, and they are open to community contributions. They recognize that some collections can and should be developed to respond to shorter-term local needs. They see the need to push filtered content rather than waiting for users to pull it on their own. The fire hose does not shut off, and we can perform critical human

filter functions for communities that will not wait.

Our profession includes digital curators tasked with the responsibility for national and major organizational collections of digital records and artifacts. It also includes professionals who care deeply about quickly sharing new titles on a readers' advisory Pinterest Board, funneling current awareness news to a focused community using Scoop.it, creating a network of LibGuides to guide stakeholder interests or research, and teaching young people how to manage new information and communication landscapes and preserve their own digital content.

Using Bundlr as a curation tool, Robin Good, also known as Luigi Canali De Rossi, who blogs and curates at *Master New Media*, collected what he believed were the best definitions of curation he found online.<sup>5</sup> (Only one of those appears to have come from a library-related source.)

Recurring terms appearing across the definitions were scouting, identifying relevance, pointing to, making sense of, aggregating, managing, distilling, discovering, sorting, culling, seeking, summarizing, sharing, presenting, gathering, contextualizing, sifting, arranging, pattern-recognizing, spotting similarities, grouping, researching, evaluating, categorizing, customizing, vetting, context, housing, filter feeding, crafting narrative, interpreting, organizing, storytelling, publishing, disseminating, creating, editing, collaging, crediting, referencing, understanding, and contributing around a specific topic or theme.

These words clearly point to the presence of human rather than algorithmic activity. Among the metaphors used in the definitions:

Essentially, a content curator acts as a go-between [sic] publishers and readers. Think of them as personal trainers who not only tell you what to eat, but also deliver the best foods right to your doorstep.<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

Curators in the museum world are the storytellers of the museum. It isn't merely their goal to assemble great art, or quality exhibits—it's their goal to craft a narrative, find the exhibits that support that narrative, and tie the disparate parts together into one cohesive experience.<sup>7</sup>

Although verbs like vet and filter appear in the curated list of definitions, some verbs were absent—authenticate, validate, catalog.

Well-known blogger and nonprofit trainer and consultant Beth Kanter often writes about curation for a nonlibrary audience and recognizes its benefits relating to both networked and individual learning:

Curation is about shifting through a lot of information to find the gems in the topic areas that help me and my network learn. It is an important part of my content strategy for feeding my network and for blogging. I'm also working on a book (not about curation), but the process is helping find new ideas

for the book. Curation is about making sense of information.<sup>8</sup>

While the literature and the experts we interviewed agree that curation is an activity that is more sophisticated and meaningful than the simple act of personal or shared bookmarking, curation means slightly different things to different curators. In general, though, there seems to be consensus that curation is a step beyond aggregation and collection.

Social media curators make sense of the vast flood of digital content. They deliberately and continually scout, identify relevance, evaluate, classify, organize, aggregate, personalize, and add value to content. They share their efforts in web-based presentations that tell a story and offer context and meaning for a targeted audience.

## Purpose of This Project

This project primarily focuses on the word *curation* as it is popularly applied to activities that leverage the power of social media to collect, organize, share, and interpret content to tell a digital story for a specific audience.

We hope that this exploration serves three purposes:

1. to provide a snapshot of the state of digital curation using social media across libraryland and to share ideas from a few social media curation thought leaders slightly beyond the library community
2. to present new models for practitioners
3. to offer a springboard from which further exploration of these efforts can emerge and be studied

This project includes the results of a limited-sample survey, as well as conversations with social media curators across libraryland and beyond. We hope that, taken as a whole, our approach presents a big picture, an inclusive view of how a variety of professionals define and practice social media curation to enrich existing assets and build community. As in any snapshot, the lens will focus on a particular subject, leaving interesting elements outside of the frame. The significant work of digital humanists and data curators lives outside of this particular frame. We are also aware that while this curated exploration includes close-ups of practitioners in four areas of library work, our exhibit—our curated story—is not panoramic. It doesn't include all of the shots. For instance, our section on special libraries includes large digital projects and a professional library setting. It does not include a corporate library. (Perhaps our publisher will give us another shot.)

It is interesting to note that not only libraries, but also library organizations and library publications,

leverage curation tools as well as their traditional websites. The American Library Association uses Pinterest to share conference information, including a curated gallery of speakers. Among the boards *American Libraries* magazine shares is one featuring portraits of all the ALA presidents. ALA also presents a variety of YouTube playlists where it curates videos of award winners on its Youth Media Awards channel. In addition to its traditional lists, YALSA shares mobile access award-winning titles on its free Teen Book Finder app.

### *ALA Annual Conference*

[www.pinterest.com/alaannual](http://www.pinterest.com/alaannual)

### *American Libraries Pinterest boards*

[www.pinterest.com/amlibraries](http://www.pinterest.com/amlibraries)

### *American Libraries: ALA Presidents*

[www.pinterest.com/amlibraries/ala-presidents](http://www.pinterest.com/amlibraries/ala-presidents)

### *ALA YouTube playlists*

<https://www.youtube.com/user/AmLibraryAssociation/playlists>

### *ALA Youth Media Awards YouTube channel*

<https://www.youtube.com/user/ALAYouthMediaAwards/featured>

### *YALSA's Pinterest boards*

[www.pinterest.com/yalsa](http://www.pinterest.com/yalsa)

### *YALSA's Teen Book Finder app*

[www.ala.org/yalsa/products/teenbookfinder](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/products/teenbookfinder)

## How We Use the New Tools

Librarians use social media curation tools idiosyncratically. We may use a variety of tools for a variety of purposes based on the stages and purposes of our efforts, the task at hand, the affordances of the tools themselves, and the audience for our efforts.

In our conversations, librarians spoke of using curation tools for search; for current awareness-type discoveries; as an in-box; as a staging area; as a repository for keeping track of our own stuff; as a tool for organizing knowledge and building collections; as a sharing tool; for professional development; as a communication tool; as a marketing tool; as a tool for teaching; as a tool for readers' advisory; as a tool to create community; as a strategy for promoting and scaling resources, investments, and services. In fact, librarians use curation tools across the traditional functions of librarianship.

Many librarians seek professional community in their curation activities. They rely on their communities for resource discovery, for support, and for models of effective practice. In fact, they build their personal learning networks (PLNs) through their curation efforts. Getting leads quickly to giving. Networked curators begin to feel the obligation to contribute, and in some cases to become the go-to person around an area of knowledge on their platform of choice. A concept that emerged and resonated in our interviews and our survey: if it's worth saving, it's likely to be worth sharing with your community. Curators help keep their professional communities up-to-date. These efforts help build social capital, especially when that sharing reaches beyond the link or the video and adds value to the community through added context and voice.

Librarians spoke of mashing up their preferred tools, combining them in a variety of ways. Think of it using a parking lot metaphor. While many of us continue to use the catalog or a formal website as the entry point for access, others now weave together, embed, or park several emerging platforms or solutions on that larger lot. The parking lot, or launch page platform, makes it possible to aggregate a variety of curation tools with the expectation that they will all play nice together.

It used to be that library catalogs functioned as the sole entry point to our collections. While some of us have expanded the notion of circ/cat to a social platform that accommodates a variety of media formats and may include user-generated content, for many of us, the catalog is one element of our larger collections. In our efforts to make resources discoverable, we may link to or embed the catalog on a LibGuide page or a Drupal site that includes feeds and streams for videos, blogs, presentations, Twitter streams, infographics, e-books, etc. Our collections no longer need to be limited to the things we buy. Collection can now include whatever we decide to point to, embed, or curate. It may include any free web content that has value for our communities. We add value to those individual items that we discover by presenting them in a new context for our communities, both inside and outside our catalogs.

## What's in It for Our Stakeholders?

Librarians are uniquely qualified to curate. We have always been about facilitating physical and intellectual access to information and learning. We study the specific needs and interests of our communities. We are trained to critically evaluate, select, and share content and services. We have always been there to tame the information flow, to facilitate discovery and knowledge building.

We have new opportunities and tools to organize attractive digital collections and scale our practice beyond time and geographical limitations. Curation allows us to reach community members 24/7 at the point of need. This scaling enables us to present new titles and share news with patrons who may never enter our doors. When we curate, we leverage and maximize the reach of our digital and physical purchases. We make best use of and add context to free materials, like open educational resources (OER) and major media portals. Curation maximizes the reach of our guidance, our services, our instructional voice, and it points to our value as information professionals. Curation allows us to share our expertise with wider social presence.

Through our curation efforts, we model potential life skills to our community. In school libraries, curation is part of the teaching of new research skills and a strategy for student inquiry. In addition to showing learners how to navigate the information fog, by presenting a lighthouse, teacher-librarians show young people how to curate around their own interests and create launchpads to manage their information worlds. By modeling and demonstrating personal knowledge mastery or management (PKM), we teach all of our stakeholders why to curate and how to do so effectively and thoughtfully.

Librarians are beginning to share curation strategies with their communities—to teach curation. The Library of Congress offers significant resources relating to personal archiving. Its Personal Archiving page links to advice on preserving photographs, audio, video, e-mail, personal records, and websites. These resources include a personal archiving day kit. The Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) offers a variety of ways for local community members to participate in curation activities and follow professional efforts on social media.

*LOC: Personal Archiving*

[www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving](http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving)

*DPLA: Get Involved*

<http://dp.la/info/get-involved>

A growing body of scholarship supports the reality and the benefits of participatory culture, described by Henry Jenkins and his cowriters in the 2006 white paper *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*.<sup>9</sup> Social media curation strategies contribute to the expression of library as a participatory space—in both its brick-and-mortar and its web-based presence.

Jenkins et al. share that the forms of participatory culture include

Affiliations—memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media . . .

Expressions—producing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups

Collaborative Problem-solving—working together in teams, formal and informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge . . .

Circulations—Shaping the flow of media (such as podcasting, blogging)<sup>10</sup>

Our social media curation efforts can help us fuel participatory culture as we build and connect our communities. Like the physical public library corkboard, social media corkboards point to community events, connect community organizations, and highlight community news, achievements, and voices.

Philosopher and coauthor of *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, David Weinberger currently works at the Harvard Library Innovation Lab. In his recent writings and talks, Weinberger suggests that libraries can and should be platforms. In a 2012 blog post, he explains the concept of platform and advocates for a more open, more connected approach to service that appears to support a social media approach to curation:

If the mission is to help the community develop and pursue knowledge and culture, it would certainly provide tools and services that enable communities to form around these objects. The platform would make public the work of local creators, and would provide contexts within which these works can be found, discussed, elaborated, and appropriated. It would provide an ecosystem in which ideas and conversations flow out and in, weaving objects into local meanings and lives. Of course it would allow the local culture to flourish while simultaneously connecting it with the rest of the world—ideally by beginning with linking it into other local library platforms.<sup>11</sup>

Social media curation allows us to create that ecosystem. We can use new curation tools as flexible and virtually limitless containers to archive images and video and tweets of poetry slams, bookmark contests, digital instruction, community events, research projects, and scholarship. Curation makes it possible to scan and publish local collections, those old community histories formerly hidden in file cabinets and frayed document boxes.

Our social media curation efforts inform our practice. When we tweet and curate tweets at a professional conference, we amplify the speakers' voices and share the learning experience. When we share and make discoverable our best reports and research and slides and displays, the profession grows as a result.

In many ways, curation is the new search. By presenting curation platforms to our communities, we open their search tool kits and allow them to benefit

from the devoted efforts of experts, enthusiasts, and other librarians who regularly take the lead in a particular subject area, who volunteer to scan the real-time environment as scouts and grow Scoop.its, Pinterest boards, Paper.li papers, and LibGuides. Librarians can lead users to the search pages of relevant curation tools. For instance, merely visiting the LibGuides Community search box opens a portal to the work of thousands of other librarians with different expertise. Often these efforts will address the long-tail needs of members of our communities.

Imagine a parent seeking information on autism. A Google or Bing search cannot offer the context and selectivity offered by a fellow parent, medical expert, special education teacher, or a librarian curator who knows what matters, removes the noise, and annotates the important stuff. Helping a businessperson identify the right marketing curations may be a critically important current awareness discovery.

Of course, curation efforts should be evaluated in the same way we evaluate other sources. We need to guide our communities in asking: Who is the curator? Which curators can you trust? Is a curator attached to a team, publication, institution, organization? How can the quality of their insights, selections, sources, and feeds be judged? Do their efforts have many followers? Is the curation active and current? Is it biased?

The librarians we spoke with and the librarians we surveyed shared stories of how social media curation improves or enhances their professional practice. What does effective practice look like? What are the issues? We present here our collection of survey responses, interviews across libraryland, and resources to help you explore on your own.

## Notes

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3. "What Is Digital Curation?" Digital Curation Centre, last modified 2014, [www.dcc.ac.uk/digital-curation/what-digital-curation](http://www.dcc.ac.uk/digital-curation/what-digital-curation).
4. Julia Flanders and Trevor Muñoz, "An Introduction to Humanities Data Curation," DH Curation Guide, accessed July 30, 2014, <http://guide.dhcuration.org/intro>.
5. Robin Good, "What Is Content Creation: Definition," Bundlr, last modified 2014, <http://bundlr.com/b/content-curation-definition>.
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11. David Weinberger, "[2b2k] Libraries Are Platforms?" *Joho the Blog*, April 12, 2012, [www.hyperorg.com/blogger/2012/04/27/2b2k-libraries-are-platforms](http://www.hyperorg.com/blogger/2012/04/27/2b2k-libraries-are-platforms).