

Conclusion

Issues and Trends

Abstract

Chapter 9 of *Library Technology Reports* (vol. 50, no. 7), “Social Media Curation,” concludes that social media curation is a legitimate and growing facet of library practice. While interpreted differently in various venues, this collection of curation snapshots demonstrates how libraries are leveraging social media to promote and share resources and facilitate human connections to libraries. Considering all that we have learned, a final view into developing trends and sticky issues of social media curation across libraryland is offered here.

First things first—“curation” is a terrible term. . . . 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 Popova¹

While the first four laws deal with the functions of a library, the Fifth Law tells us about the vital and lasting characteristics of the library as an institution and enjoins the need for a constant adjustment of our outlook in dealing with it. . . . The Fifth Law is: The Library is a growing organism. . . . A growing organism takes in new matter, casts off old matter, changes in size and takes new shapes and forms.

—Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan²

Should we accept them, librarians have unlimited opportunities for leadership in social media curation, functioning as guides, information brokers, interpreters, storytellers, innovators, teachers, marketers, networkers, and connectors. What Maria Popova calls “an increasingly valuable form of creative and intellectual labor, a form of authorship” is an area we cannot ignore. In our areas of expertise, for users we know so well, we should not be abdicating these activities to others.

In his Fifth Law of Library Science, Ranganathan embraces the notion of agility. Ranganathan’s Fifth Law resonates with David Weinberger’s dynamic and organic vision of library as platform or “ecosystem in which ideas and conversations flow out and in, weaving objects into local meanings and lives.”³

Social Media Curation Is a Thing

Our conversations with librarians across ALA’s divisions point to potential. By using social media platforms—both free and subscription—our work as curators can allow us to build new services and promote, scale, and engage our stakeholders with the services and resources we already have. This work allows us to help our communities build new skills and capacities around their own interests and knowledge needs. This work fuels our own current awareness and professional development and our contributions to the profession.

Our relevance is connected to our roles as content filters for our communities—professional and institutional. Our relevance is also connected to how we

engage with our communities, facilitate their building of knowledge, and celebrate their work. Our stakeholders have limited time; they seek trusted filters; we have talents worth sharing. We also have new capabilities to curate not only content, but our services, our support, and our instruction and to meet our users in familiar spaces when they are not physically with us. We have new opportunities to make our services discoverable, to embed our work in spaces outside our walls.

Our case-study interviews point to the notion that social media curation liberates librarians from levels of editorial restraints. It allows professionals the creative freedom to tell relevant stories by sharing new types of collections of both original and ethically borrowed content. Social media curation allows us, remaining true to our missions, to add dynamic assets to long-valued traditional content and to hack, poke, and mash up our libraries in meaningful ways.

The librarians we spoke with each took a slightly different approach and shared a slightly different definition of social media curation as it relates to their practices. It seems there is no one-size-fits-all or one-size-fits-one-type-of-library-or-librarian approach. While many librarians use LibGuides as a platform, container, or parking lot, what happens on those guides may vary dramatically depending on user needs and the ways practitioners choose to mash up and personalize the content. What is clear is that librarians are interested and many are actively leading and experimenting. And these translations of service appear to be happening organically.

Our digital efforts transform brick-and-mortar practice. When librarians first ventured into the digital realm, it was with the purpose of promoting the physical space, making services ubiquitous, extending reach, and broadening access to resources. Now, our social media practices are reshaping the way we do business in the physical space, bringing greater amplification to what's happening in both environments, helping to fuse the physical and virtual into one living organism.

But social media curation is not without its issues.

Keeping It Fresh

As we focus on the new, we also need to consider the relevance of older records we previously curated, link rot, how to preserve what is important as platforms shift and disappear, and how to weed what may no longer be relevant or living from our social media collections.

Curation with social media is a proactive service. Once you begin to build a level of trust, once you begin to exceed expectations, you'll be relied on to continue exceeding expectations.

Beyond the excitement of launching a new project,

someone will need to grapple with digital rot and with continually discovering fresh content. Curating takes time, and the institution or department should be aware of the workflow required for a successful effort. Social media curators need time for curation as an intellectual activity. They need time to read and sift through newsfeeds and time to develop a voice. They need time also to create content and to describe, present, and add value and context to borrowed content. They need time to listen to community response and to interact with that response. Curators are also responsible for surveying the landscape and keeping up with shifts in platforms. They need to know when a once-useful platform loses critical mass or no longer supports its purpose and be agile enough to migrate.

It's Real Professional Work (but Maybe Not a Completely Sanctioned Activity)

Our survey revealed that time was a serious issue for many who consider themselves social media curators. Traditional curators, digital archivists, and data curators are hired to curate. It's their full-time gig.

Most of the library professionals we surveyed and interviewed viewed social media curation as a passion, a professional commitment, a natural extension of their jobs. Though it would seem logical that social media curation is a translation of traditional library functions on new platforms, many of the librarians we surveyed and interviewed described their work as a labor of love, work performed largely on their own time. Others shared that, while their efforts are not formally recognized by their institutions, their activities offer invaluable professional development, scale library services, promote resources, connect them with their communities, and build social capital for their organizations and themselves professionally.

While Oakland Public's Amy Sonnie shared that OPL's social media policy prioritizes "experimentation and thoughtful evaluation of new technologies that we think will help inform our practice and reach new audiences," for other librarians, finding time to curate social media means finding that time off-the-clock.

Issues with Free and the Poof Factor

Building trust takes time. Your efforts are based on relationship building and trust. Curation is deeper than library promotion. It's about value and engagement.

When we use third-party commercial platforms, especially the free ones, we need to be aware of their transience and also whether our endorsement of a platform is justified. Our users trust us and what we represent to them as community institutions. Our use

of tools that collect cookies or private information may present issues, especially if we are working with young people. However popular a platform might be, we need to concern ourselves with its mission, its purpose, and the ethics of those behind the digital curtain.

A large number of the librarians we interviewed and surveyed rely on free tools for their community popularity, their ease of use, and, of course, their price. Though they were completely aware of free lunch syndrome, they worried about the sustainability of platforms with which they had no formal business commitment. In addition, they expressed concerns over the advertising and privacy violations that might occur on a platform they could not completely control. Some of the platforms restrict participation to those over the age of 13, and some, like the ubiquitously used YouTube, are blocked by school districts. Many of us have been burned when our free favorites died with little or no warning and no solution for saving the work we stored. Community culture and institutional guidelines and policies, as well as our personal approaches to risk-aversion, will guide our platform choices. Social media is about the here and now and meeting immediate needs. Current platforms will shift and be replaced by tools that do the work better. Should YouTube and Vimeo *go poof*, it will likely be because a group of clever developers discovered how to share video in more efficient, effective, and exciting ways. Migration is a norm. Face it, we're not choosing long-term relationships or life-cycle attachments when we curate using social media.

The Other Side of Free

On the other side of free is the glorious flourishing of open-source applications, open-access and open educational resources, and Creative Commons-licensed media as content beyond what we purchased from traditional publishing sources. Ignoring these wildflowers in favor of greenhouse cultivation would mean significantly limiting the bouquet we present to our users. Librarians must develop strategies to discover, harvest, and make this emerging content usable and discoverable to remain relevant in the emerging information ecosystem.

Controlling(?) the Institutional Message

Institutions that engage in social media curation and any other social media activities cannot fully control their message. Insularity and control are antithetical to social media. Votes and likes and comments and feedback are part of the package when a library moves from a one-to-many to a conversational model. Some

tools allow choice regarding interaction. Should your library allow conversation as part of the curated library experience, it will need to engage with the community in ways that serve to build relationships and social capital. The team leading the social media curation effort will need to consider strategies for addressing possible hacking, hijacking, and spamming.

Copyright, Fair Use, and Credit

Librarians have an obligation to encourage and model curation ethics. When we demonstrate respect for intellectual property through careful attribution, we model the disposition and the process for our communities. Library Pinterest boards, Scoop.its, and LibGuides must demonstrate respect for creators of content.

When librarians curate using social media, they need to take the highest road, always attributing and crediting items discovered and redistributed when they pin, scoop, clip, and link. It is good form to also acknowledge the source of these discoveries. In the Twitter community, for instance, the protocol is to use a via *@mysource* credit.

Can Librarians Over-curate?

At this moment, social media curation is a kind of Wild West of sharing or, perhaps, a shopping spree. It's easy to get a bit carried away with our ability to collect and aggregate what is free into collections. Some of us will be tempted to hoard or binge shop, rather than curate. Curators need to consider their audience and if its needs are truly being met.

It is possible that librarians may curate too much. Over-curation efforts can potentially create new fire hoses. Too much information in one space is still too much, no matter how we attempt to reorganize or repackage it. We might run the risk of overwhelming users or unintentionally diminishing their willingness or interest in searching and curating for themselves. We need to assess if our efforts provoke independent exploration or discourage it.

Authority, Transparency, and Can We Curate Too Narrowly?

On the other hand, as we do our best to vet signal from noise, we run the risk, intentionally or unintentionally, of functioning as gatekeepers. Will our individual curation efforts serve to narrow the lens as we filter it? Are we relying on narrowly filtered sources when we feed our efforts, and are we creating what Eli Pariser (2011) might label "filter bubbled" curations with what we present to our communities?⁴ When we curate for a

larger audience, we need to be aware of perspective. What are we including? What are we overlooking or intentionally excluding? Do we demonstrate our own biases or myopia in our curations? Are we conscious of the full chorus of voices engaged in the conversation? Are we presenting an echo chamber?

In the same way that Google presents a filtered representation of results based on its knowledge of your search habits, our own curations may highlight or ignore content for our users based on our personal interests or biases.

We have collection development and materials selection policies to guide us in building and sharing our print collections and websites. Should we develop and share our policies for curating social media content? Should we tell our users what these efforts are about?

Social media curation is a living, breathing enterprise. Just because we make suggestions doesn't mean our advice is the final authority. Discoveries from our communities may vary in validity, and news takes time to verify.

Avoiding Silos

Holistic connectivity of platforms is a design issue. Our presence across platforms should be seamlessly linked. Libraries have become device-agnostic—users access and take their libraries with them as they wish. Do our curated guides, regardless of platform, support the user's strategic workflow? How can we avoid forcing users to hunt for those multiple platforms on which we represent *library*? We need to come up with workable strategies to weave together our physical and digital assets to ensure users get easily to the platforms and content they most want to use. We need to avoid creating ever-new silos.

Final Thoughts

Flipping through this collection of curation snapshots reveals new direction and passion in library practice. The professionals with whom we spoke believed in their labors of love. They demonstrate that there is room in the library world for all types of efforts, all sorts of mash-ups. Perhaps it's time to stop fighting about the meaning of 'curation.' Depending on the needs of the user, library as platform offers access to formally cataloged digital content as well as to the library's Twitter feed updates, slideshows of student art, videos of the latest programs, instructional screen-casts, best tools for digital storytelling, relevant news-feeds, carefully crafted newsletters, user reviews, and virtual shelves of quirky genres.

With our professional skills, we can leverage emerging tools to achieve our traditional goals and our missions. The social media landscape is the information landscape. If we want our communities to view us as information and communication authorities, if we want our communities to understand the full scope of their own information worlds, if we want our young people to grow up being able to curate their own information lives, opting out is not an option. Curation is more than simply meeting users on a social media platform. It is about performing legitimate and meaningful, but perhaps playful, library work in new spaces and bringing it all home.

It's okay to be beta. Waiting for the final version may mean we don't get in the game at all.

Failure to engage means that others are addressing information needs that we should be actively addressing ourselves. If we don't harness the social media curation tools for our communities, others outside the library world will.

In chapter 7, Robin Good concludes his interview with a call to action:

So far, dear librarian, we have come to you. . . . But now, the Internet reverses this. We ask Google. We ask friends or our social networks where and how to find information.

But you, librarian, you are a container of deeply valuable information. So if you don't make yourself available, interceptable in a way that displays and showcases all that wonderful knowledge, without requiring every single person to come and ask you in person and by voice, you are really doing a disservice, not just to us, but to yourself. Start to capitalize, to scale all the great work researching, studying, and organizing that you've done, but provide the opportunity for others to access that knowledge and experience. You do that by creating collections. There are millions of ways that librarians can become guides.

Notes

1. Maria Popova, "What We Talk about When We Talk about 'Curation,'" *Brain Pickings* (blog), March 16, 2012, www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/03/16/percolate-curation.
2. Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (London: Edward Goldston, 1931), 382; available from the Arizona Open Repository, <https://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/bitstream/10150/105454/3/PrefM.pdf>.
3. David Weinberger, "[2b2k] Libraries Are Platforms?" *Joho the Blog*, April 12, 2012, www.hyperorg.com/blogger/2012/04/27/2b2k-libraries-are-platforms.
4. Eli Pariser, "Beware of Online Filter Bubbles," TED, March, 2011, www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles.