

## Introduction

Curation-related discourses have become widespread. The growing public profile of curators, the emergence of new curation-related discourses and their proliferation beyond the confines of museums particularly on social media have led some to conclude that we now live in an age of curation (Buskirk, cited in Synder). Curation is commonly understood in instrumentalist terms as the evaluation, selection and presentation of artefacts around a central theme or motif (see O'Neill, Synder). However, there is a growing academic interest in what underlies the shifting discourses and practices i.e. what do the changes mean (Martinon). Paul O'Neill coined the term "the curatorial turn" to capture the emergence of curation as a legitimate object of academic study in museum studies.

This article locates an exploration of the curatorial turn in journalism studies since 2010 within the shifting meanings of curation from antiquity to the digital age. It argues that the industry is facing a Foucauldian moment i.e. the changing political economy of news and the proliferation of user-generated content on social media have disrupted the monopolies traditional news media held over the circulation of knowledge of current affairs and the power this gave them to shape public debate. The disruptions are profound, prompting a rethinking of journalism (Peters and Broersma; Schudson). However, the debate has polarised between those who view news curation as symptomatic of the demise of journalism (see Picard); others see it as part of a wider revival of the profession, freed from monopolistic institutions and able to circulate knowledge that challenges their power. The article eschews such polarisations and instead adapts Robert Picard's argument that journalism is in transition, that it transcends the organisations where it is located and that while the profession is adapting to the age of curation traditional news providers do not do likewise will most likely decline.

However, Picard's approach does not address the definitional problem as to what distinguishes news curating when the commonly used instrumental definition can apply to editing. The article aims to negotiate this problem by addressing some of the conceptual ambiguities that arise from wholly instrumental notions of news curation.

### **From “cura” to the curatorial turn and the age of curation**

Modern instrumentalist definitions are necessary but not sufficient for an exploration of the curatorial turn in journalism. Tracing the genealogy of curation facilitates an expansion of the instrumental to include metaphoric meanings within the conceptualization. The term originated in a Latin allegorical tale about the bringing into being of man from the clay of the earth and the “cura” that does this is translated literally as care or concern and metaphorically as a symbol of curiosity and creativity (Nowotny). “Curator” first emerged in Imperial Rome to denote a public officer charged with maintaining order and taking care of the finances of the city but primarily accountable to the emperor and a symbol of imperial power (Nowotny). By the fourteenth century, the term had been appropriated into Middle English, adapted to a religious officer charged with the care and preservation of the souls but the metaphorical associations of creativity and curiosity subsided (Gaskill).

The metaphorical associations re-emerged six hundred years later in a secularised context and modified form. Souls were replaced by artefacts deemed to be of extraordinary value because of their contribution to human knowledge or as a testament to exceptional human creativity (Nowotny). Objects of curiosity and originality as well as their creators, were valorised and reified while the curator was relegated to the background to collect, evaluate and archive creative artefacts entrusted to the care of the museums or galleries i.e. instrumentalist meanings dominated. Curation became a specialist practice exercised by an expert custodian charged with the care and preservation of valued artefacts to satisfy the curiosity of present and future generations but without a creative input by the curator.

From the 1960s, discourses shifted again from the privileging of “producer who actually creates the object in its materiality” to an entire set of actors (Bourdieu 261) with the changing political economy of museums, the growing prevalence of exhibitions and the emergence of mega-exhibitions hosted in global cities and capable of attracting massive audiences (see O’Neill; Rugg and Sedgwick). The curator became foregrounded, no longer merely a custodian of artefacts but able to add cultural value and creativity of their own when drawing individual items together and interpreting their relevance to a theme then re-presenting them through a story or visuals (see O’Neill). The verb “to curate” entered the English lexicon for the first time, the publicity around mega-exhibitions and the higher

profile of curators attracted the attention of intellectuals prompting a curatorial turn in museum studies.

The curatorial turn marks the emergence of curation as a legitimate object of academic enquiry. Academics identified a “Foucauldian moment” in museum studies where shifting discourses signify challenges to traditional forms of knowledge and disruptions to knowledge-based power relations (see O’Neill). Curation was no longer seen as a neutral activity of preservation, but located within a contested political economy and one invested with contradictions and complexities. Philosophers highlighted the impossibility of separating the oversight of valuable artefacts from the processes by which these are selected, valorised and signified as well as the sometimes controversial circumstances in which creative outputs were appropriated (Nowotny).

Recently, curating-related discourses have expanded out of the “rarefied” world of museum studies into wider circulation (Synder). Social media platforms have facilitated the proliferation of user-generated content offering a vast array of new artefacts, information and misinformation provided by new creators whose discourses may challenge traditional bases of knowledge. Audiences now actively search for new material driven in part by curiosity and a growing distrust of the professions and establishments (see Holmberg). Such shifts on social media are disrupting and destabilizing the intellectual rules used to guard the boundaries of professional knowledge; the boundaries between the professionals and lay people are blurring; and knowledge is being democratized. However, as new information becomes voluminous, truth becomes more overtly relative and information as well as misinformation proliferates there is a growing demand for curation of online content in the instrumental sense of the evaluation or verification, selection and presentation of artefacts organised around a central theme. That is, the appropriation of social media is challenging traditional power relations but also offering new opportunities for new information-related practices. The disrupting that is ensuing constitutes journalism’s own Foucauldian moment.

### **A Foucauldian moment in journalism studies**

For more than two centuries, journalism has been understood as capturing today’s happenings, verifying the facts of an event, then presenting these as a narrative that reporters update as news unfolds. News was the preserve of professionals trained to interview eyewitnesses able to credibility to a story or experts able to explain the

significance of event. News-gathering was typically the work of an individual tasked with collecting stand-alone stories then passing them onto editors to evaluate, select, prioritise and collate these into a collection that formed a newspaper or news programme.

The emergence of a profession and associated practices coincided with the emergence of news that was accessible, that people wanted to read or watch and mass circulation media capable of attracting advertisers and formed the basis of a highly successful and lucrative business model (Park). The constraints of limited pagination and spectrum scarcity placed a premium on the selection of news and at the same time high costs of production served as a barrier to entry. Dominant discourses emerged around the presumption that trained journalists were best equipped to produce news; the large news organisations that employed these professionals were able to control the circulation of information and knowledge they generated; and the editors that selected content were able in part to shape the nature of public debates.

Social media are challenging the boundaries erected by traditional media about who can and does provide credible news. Practically every major news story in 2010 and 2011 from natural disasters to uprisings was broken by ordinary people on social media (Bruns and Highfield). Twitter facilitates a steady stream of updates and background information at an almost real-time speed that 24-hour news channels cannot match. Facebook accounts by eyewitness, Instagram images and blog commentaries add commentary, context, visuals and personal stories to breaking news. Experts and official sources routinely post announcements on social media platforms enabling anyone to access much of the same source material that previously was the preserve of reporters. Investigations by bloggers have exposed abuses of power by companies and governments that mainstream journalists had been reluctant to cover for political economy or ideological reasons. Audiences and advertisers are migrating away from traditional newspapers to a range of different online platforms. News consumers now actively use search engines to find freely available information of interest and look for efficient ways of sifting through the proliferation of the useful and the dubious, revelatory and the misleading or inaccurate. That is, news organisations and the professional journalists they employ are increasingly operating in a hyper-competitive (see Picard) and hyper-sceptical environment. Cumulatively this constitutes a Foucauldian moment when shifting discourses signify a disturbance of the intellectual rules that shape knowledge creation and the power relations they sustain.

Social media not only challenge the core news business of reporting, they also present new opportunities and some traditional organisations have responded by adding new activities to their repertoire of practices. In 2011, the *Guardian* uploaded its entire database of the expense claims of British MPs onto its Web site and invited readers to select, evaluate and comment on entries, a form of crowd-sourced curating. Andy Carvin, while at NPR, built an international reputation from his curation of breaking news, opinion and commentary on Twitter as Syria became too dangerous for foreign correspondents to enter. New types of press agencies such as Storyful have emerged around a curatorial business model that aggregates information culled from social media and uses journalists to evaluate and repackage them as news stories that are sold onto traditional news media around the world (Guerrini). Research into the growing market for such skills in the Netherlands found more advertisements for “news curators” than for “traditional reporters (Bakker). At the same time, organic and spontaneous curation can emerge out of Twitter and Facebook communities capable of challenging news reporting by legacy media (Lewis and Westlund). Running through these developments is the refrain of curation but it is occurring during a “chaotic” (Compton and Benedetti) and transformative (Picard) moment in the industry and profession accompanied by a curatorial turn in journalism studies.

### **A curatorial turn in journalism**

The curatorial turn in journalism studies is manifest in the growing academic attention to curation-related discourses and practices. A review of four academic journals in the field, i.e. *Journalism*, *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism Practice*, and *Digital Journalism* found the first mention of journalism and curation emerged in 2010 but by July 2015, there were nearly 40. The meta-analysis that follows drew on this corpus of articles.

The consensus across the literature reiterates the point made earlier i.e. of the coinciding of the breaking down of traditional news business models, the proliferation of alternative sources of news content and the emergence of “new types and practices of curation and information vetting” intended to “increase the veracity and accuracy of content” (Picard, 280). Beyond this, however, the academic debate is fragmented and the conclusions polarised. Some view emerging information practices as replacing traditional newsgathering as full time professional journalists become freelancers and more job vacancies advertise curation than traditional reporting (see Bakker). Others have focused on

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how new and traditional practices co-exist in organisations like the *BBC*, *Guardian* and *NPR*, sometimes clashing and sometimes collaborating in the co-creation of content (McQuail cited in Fahy and Nisbet; Hermida and Thurman; Thurman and Newman).

Conclusions are also polarised between whether the proliferation of curation and other new practices signify the twilight years or a new dawn for journalism (see Picard). Optimists see the proliferation of alternative sources of news as breaking the traditional monopolies news organisations held over information, exposing their ideological biases and disrupting their traditional knowledge-based power (see Hermida; Siapera, Papadopoulou, and Archontakis; Compton and Benedetti). Others have focused on the impact of news curation and other practices for “traditional” journalistic jobs (Harb; Schwalbe, Silcock, and Candello; Spaulding) and this has supported a more pessimistic view in terms of the demise of traditional forms of journalism. Robert Picard rejects this polarisation, arguing instead that journalism is in transition in journalism in which alternative sources of news and news-related practices herald a new dawn but the failure of some traditional news organisations to adapt to the new media landscape increases the likelihood of their demise (Picard). That is, journalism may or may not be located in an institution but is independent of them so while the profession will adapt and survive some organisations may not.

Picard’s conclusion that journalism is in transition negotiates the ambivalence over what the emergence of curation means for news providers but it does not address the uncertainty as to where curation sits in relation to journalism and curators to journalists. The more futuristic accounts predict that journalists will become “managers of content rather than simply sourcing one story next to another” (David Montgomery cited in Bakker; see also Fahy and Nisbet) and that roles will shift from reporting to curation. These accounts encompass emerging news-related practices within a wider umbrella of journalism. Others insist curators are not journalists but “information workers” or “gatecheckers” (McQuail 2013, cited in Bakker; Schalbe) but this is problematic because it demarcates the professional and the manual worker, reinforcing the traditional elitism, knowledge and power hierarchies of the professions that Foucault critiqued and implying curation is a lesser practice. However, such demarcation is ambiguous in that reporters *and* curators are information workers and the instrumental definition of curation is relevant to news editing. It is therefore necessary to revisit commonly used definitions (see Schwalbe, Silcock, and Candello; Bakker; Guerrini; Synder).

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The literature broadly defines content creation, which includes news reporting, as the generation of original content so distinguishable from aggregation and curation both of which entail working with existing material. News aggregation is the automated use of computer algorithms to find and collect existing content relevant to a specified subject then generate a list or image gallery (see Bakker; Synder). While aggregators may play a key part in news curation, the practices differ in their relation to technology. Apart from the upfront human design of the original algorithm, aggregation is wholly machine-driven while modern news curation adds human intervention to the technological processes of aggregation (see Bakker). This intervention is conscious rather than automated, active rather than passive and it brings to bear human knowledge, expertise and interpretation to verify and evaluate content, filter and select artefacts based on their perceived quality and relevance for a particular topic or theme then re-present them as a narrative or infographics or both. The designating of what is of interest or curious, the assigning of credibility and the ascribing of significance are interpretative and subjective. Furthermore, curation goes beyond the collation of information to include its re-organisation to create meaning and its re-presentation in an accessible form. While curation does not involve the generation of original content in the manner of news reporting; it does involve a re-imagining of existing content and so draws on a type of creativity. Thus the distinction between content creation and content curation lies primarily in the relation to original material and not the presence or otherwise of creativity.

Furthermore, curation outputs can but need not stand apart from news reports i.e. they can provide valuable background and context to news stories while the latter provide original content to sit alongside curated material thus complementing rather than competing with each. While this addresses the relation between reporting and curation, it does not clarify what distinguishes curating from editing. Bakker intimates this when he says curation also involves “editing ... enriching or combining content from different sources” (599). Teasing out the distinctions is tricky because editing is an elusive concept that encompasses a wide range of sub-specialisms and divergent duties however at a generic level, editors are “newsrooms professionals ... with decision-making authority over content and structure” who evaluate, verify and select information i.e. they are “quality controllers” in newsrooms (Stepp). This conceptualization is very similar to the instrumentalist definition of curation but the two are not synonymous but there are overlaps in the skills and tasks

involved. Curation is distinguished by the voluminous material that news curators sift through as part of a first level of content collection and in the complexity of the verification processes needed in an age when digital artefacts particularly images can be altered and falsified. Thus, curators also provide a quality control role but by relatively junior staff sometimes working with external experts in a particular region or specialism that do this type of verification (see Fahy and Nisbett). The demand for more sophisticated skills is manifest in job advertisements (see Bakker) suggesting a new kind of professionalization may be emerging. Curators are joining editors as newsroom professionals however whether this means they are journalists is still open to question.

### **Conclusion**

The article has presented a more expansive conceptualisation of news curation than is commonly used in the literature, by including both the instrumental and the symbolic dimensions of a proliferating practice. It also sought to avoid confining this wider conceptualisation within unhelpful polarisations as to whether news curation is symbolic of a wider demise or revival of journalism by distinguishing the profession from the organisation in which it operates. The article was then free to negotiate the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the often taken-for-granted instrumental meanings of curation. In distinguishing it from newsgathering on the basis of the generation of original content, it facilitated an incorporation into the concept of curation a distinctive type of creativity. In highlighting some of the overlaps with traditional editing, the article draws attention to the considerable skill that sophisticated forms of curation demand, and questions the appropriateness of reducing the news curator to the status of an “information worker”, a manual labourer rather than a professional. Instead, the article positions news curators as one of many types of newsroom professionals, and their role overlaps with others. What distinguishes them is the scale of the material they work with, together with the nature of it, i.e. they play a key role in incorporating user-generated material into news content.

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