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Abstract

As modes and types of information have evolved in the digital age, the umbrella term of *curation* has come to cover increasing types of information management practices—from the technical work of museum specialists and scientists, to everyday online search tasks and social media use. This chapter examines curation as a practice of harnessing existing information, filtering and contextualizing it through the application of criteria which assess and promote belief, and then re-presenting it. Regardless of whether curation is performed by humans or algorithmically by machines, it is the intentional justifications made in the filtering process which link information to knowledge and make curation an act of agentic meaning-making. Since curators hold the power to change narratives through the (re-)contextualization of information, the filtering of information can be a source of controversy. Corporate-driven algorithmic filters, information 'bubbles' and other potential sources of misinformation can all act as mediating agents in the curation process. Keen discernment over the reliability of text becomes critical to the outcome of its re-contextualization. As *stewards* of information and producers of knowledge, digital curators must cultivate discernment in their curation practices as a means of safeguarding information and advancing knowledge-creation.

Introduction

Curation is a practice of information gathering, management, and presentation. Whether carried out manually or computationally, the key feature of curation is the filtering process by which information is selected and shared. Through this process, curation intrinsically links information to knowledge and meaning-making. By making evaluative judgments about the validity and relevance of information, curatorship transforms information into knowledge based on awareness or belief about what is justifiably true. Thus, through the filtering process, knowledge can be said to be a byproduct of curation. Because it links information to knowledge-creation, the practice of curation is an important focus of inquiry in the fields of media literacy and education, as well as within the social sciences. The power of curation to inform and direct a conversation around a topic is another feature which makes it eminently useful.

Curation and controversy

Traditionally, curation has been the work of museum and library specialists, carefully and prodigiously selecting relevant materials to develop collections. Today, everyday acts of curation can look like selectively sharing content online, creating and maintaining a profile on any of the various social network platforms, and searching and compiling information for reporting. In each case, acts of information management create or add to a narrative around a topic. Curation describes the practices of harnessing pre-existing content, transforming it through the application of criteria which assess and promote belief, and then directing the resultant packet of filtered information to a new audience.

In addition to library and media studies, online practices of curation have been discussed within the fields of information theory, literacy studies, and computer science. Curation's relevance across multiple fields stems from its particular characteristic of being able to tell a story through the choice of carefully selected and presented artefacts, the compilation of which collectively convey meaning and knowledge not contained in the individual pieces of a collection. In this way, curation is an act of knowledge-creation—the creation of a narrative which justifies its own relevance. The byproduct of this as 'created knowledge' makes curation a powerful tool, and also a topic of controversy. It also brings to bear the difference between human and computational forms of curation. Indeed, from these two modes of curation arise variances and disruptions in how curation is utilized and applied.

While they both perform the same task, manual (human) curation and computational (algorithmic) curation have different strengths, weaknesses, and consequences. Computers and algorithms manage, filter, and report data more efficiently and thoroughly than humans can do manually. On the other hand, human processing offers impressionistic judgment, which is a

defining factor of manual curation. In both cases, the reporting of filtered and selected information creates a unique narrative with its own meaning and its own reality.

Variations of curation, however, can not only look different, but also carry different implications. At its best, curation can have the effect of a masterful presentation which is well sourced and infused with creativity, utility, and meaning. It can present itself through products like innovative and life-saving research aided by a collaborative effort of scholars whose work is converged in a scientific report. Conversely, some forms of curation can create polarizing ‘bubbles’ in which the only information one receives is filtered according to specific criteria set by the very consumers and/or producers of that information. In this scenario, the resultant ‘echo chamber’ inevitably amplifies certain narratives whilst silencing others through the re-circulation of partisan information—limiting the opportunity for a person to encounter conflicting views. Examples include Facebook friends’ lists and Twitter feeds in which disagreeable information can be purged through ‘unfollow’ and ‘block’ options. Similarly, algorithmically determined newsfeeds decide on the information which is presented to a user based on personal habits, preferences, and usages. In both cases, filtered bubbles are created and maintained through a set of decisions and actions. The difference is in the nature of the filtering mechanisms.

Since curation is about information management, it becomes important to question *who manages these filters*. This question is critical because inherent in the filtering process are things like subjective evaluation, purpose, editorialization, summary, reduction, and approximation. A curated packet of information that results from this process is, therefore, imbued with these determinations.

To be a curator of information, awareness and discernment of the mediating factors is imperative—as is the ability to discriminate between sources and gauge authenticity and validity. Indeed, this is a critical requirement for the effective management and assessment of the troves of data available online, and also a requirement for detecting ineffectiveness and misguidance in what has been called “pre-curated” data (Bhatt 2017)—or data which has already been filtered with some particular justification parameters.

The defining factors of curation

The use of Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) has become ubiquitous in everyday life. As the amount of information on any topic immediately available to us has grown exponentially, and as we increasingly conduct our affairs online, much of the data that inform our life, behavior, and decisions are mediated by computers and the Internet. The consequences of this relate to curation; and as such, curation has now come to encompass multitudinous and increasing forms of data managing behavior. Curation as a term has

therefore evolved to describe what is often done in digital environments and online in social, personal, educational, and commercial spaces.

This has been examined and documented in each of these areas through the study of such things as ‘remix’ practices in music production, sharing content on social media, and writing and literacy in education. Each of these varied tasks involves curation outlined as: *1. Problematising an issue or topic; 2. Anthologising and aggregating information relevant to a topic and enlisting filters to manage it; 3. Applying subjective, editorial discretion to appeal to and reach a target audience; 4. Adding value to pre-existing content by contributing new or extended meaning and/or create a new narrative; and 5. Presenting that data in the appropriately determined platform* (Bhatt 2017: p.120).

Noticeably, computational and human curation are concurrent practices. While content aggregation manifests largely as algorithmically managed data, with little or no value placed on truth, accuracy, and morality, the remainder of the task lies in the hands of a human curator who can make meanings out of the voluminous amounts of information that would overwhelm us otherwise. This discriminating behavior is about adding value, making meaning, and inspiring novelty. It is at the heart of content curation.

Indeed, the notion of meaning-making as a pre-eminent characteristic of curation is echoed widely. It is the factor that is most influential in making curation transformative. Adding meaning or expanding a narrative on a subject extends the relevance of that idea, that act of creativity, or that literacy event into the future—creating a new narrative, and in a sense, a new reality.

This process of re-combining pre-existing content to fabricate new content has also been dubbed as ‘remix’ and has been scrutinized for its paradoxically sequacious and innovative nature (Gunkel 2016). In their investigation into the remixing practices of Internet bloggers and fanfiction writing, Lankshear and Knobel (2015) highlight the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning-making which are enacted by searching, filtering, combining, repurposing, narrating, and sharing. These practices of creative decoding and encoding of information lend important insights into curation as a latent form of digital literacy.

Bhatt (2017), working in the field of literacy and education, documented practices of curation during his investigation into strategies of how college students searched for information, drew from previous texts, and handled a multitude of textual sources during their writing tasks. Mihailidis and Cohen (2013) and Barton (2017) also found similar practices in different contexts.

Mihailidis and Cohen investigated the online practices of students as they filtered and aggregated online information. Highlighting the need for students to be analytical and critical in

their online life, they suggest a new set of pedagogical approaches which promote critical thinking and information filtering skills, and are centered around curation practices. Also examining curation as a digital literacy practice, Barton explored curation as part of social *tagging* in the photo-sharing site Flickr. Specific to how users utilized the tagging feature, he found that curation practices created a story not told by the pictures themselves, and not predicted by the site's designers. All three of these investigations expose users/curators as active meaning-makers and agents of change.

Curators as agents of change

Curation is a subjective and inherently ideological process in which curators select existing objects to construct their own 'truths.' Through this production, curation becomes a creative expression of self-representation by which a curator can represent anything from empirical facts to information about oneself in a contextualized way. Embedded in the narrative that is created are the values of the narrator. In doing this, a narrator becomes the de-facto author over a composition of voices, and by developing and employing skills which enable agency (Potter & Gilje 2015), (s)he can also become an agent of change.

Barton's study of tagging practices on Flickr (mentioned above) is illustrative of this—showing how users of a platform perform curation practices *agentively*. By strategically recreating their online photo-narratives in order to demand change on the social media platform, users acted in a manner which was at odds with the intentions of the site's developers. Curation practices, therefore, are something that can allow power to be distributed a certain way. This potential is magnified when considering that the Internet itself is curated by millions of individual users making individual choices, effectively binding them together through shared practices.

Certainly, curation has the potential to be powerful. Millions of users coalescing around a narrative can affect change. This has been seen in social activism movements like the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring, and other forms of political populism where a narrative is crafted, editorialized, shared, and continuously re-crafted—giving it a new reality when interpreted and acted upon by others.

But not all curation is the same. Where there is self-representation, there can be misrepresentation. And the difference can be as significant as the difference between knowledge-creation versus a repeated circulation of misinformation and proliferation of ignorance. The first represents novelty, creativity, and innovation and is arguably the future of learning and scholarship; the other, through the aggregation of people within increasingly partisan networks, was dubbed in the 2013 *World Economic Forum Report* as one of the main threats to human society and modern civilization.

Discernment

The ability to transform ideas existing as data floating on the internet into emergent concepts under the authorship of a curator is certainly significant, and it is aided and made more complex by the broadness of the Internet and the accessibility of its information. But effective curation requires thought and analysis applied through shrewd discernment, particularly at the aggregation and editorialization phases. There is simply too much information for humans alone to successfully harness. As such, the mediation of traditional *stewardship* (e.g. librarians, teachers, and even parents) has now had to give way to the work of computational curators.

Information searching now *requires* computer processors, search engines, and other tools of information management. Additionally, the Internet largely employs machine learning to organize itself and make things easier to find. While this delegation of curation work to machines is essential, its self-regulatory management has important implications. One consequence is that management filters can act as *pre-curators* (Bhatt 2017). Search algorithms greatly affect the information we see and choose, and for that reason, search and social media executives hold the secrets to their algorithms tightly. Using data that is pre-curated according to algorithmic predictions about what we are looking for, or what others want us to see, think, or buy (into), will ultimately change the outcome of curation. More precisely, computational curation such as this affects the decisions and recommendations individuals, employers, and governments make for themselves and society. While this particular kind of curation is *considered* by many as more objective due to its mathematical formulation, those formulations are in themselves intrinsically biased by those who create the algorithms.

Algorithms now have increasing power over our lives due to their efficient information-harnessing and decision-making capabilities, but with an objectivity level that is questionable at best. For example, in 2009, a US school system applied an algorithmic teacher assessment tool which measured students' progress and calculated the extent to which their educational progress (or decline) was attributable to individual teachers. The teachers with the lowest calculated scores were fired each year, regardless of any positive evaluations and testimonials that they had received elsewhere. This demonstrates one of many ethical concerns with reliance on computational data management.

Equally important is the way computer algorithms promote and 'sponsor' information based on corporate revenue maximization. Online search information is seen by many as objective and is then utilized in compiling investigative or academic reports. This has consequences. The facade of objectivity is important to recognize and it becomes important to ask: *Who benefits when algorithms rank information? What role does the promotion or limiting of information have on decision making, and why does it matter?* Information theorists such as

Clay Shirky, Tristan Harris, Luciano Floridi, and Frank Pasquale all point to the same thing: that credibility and authority are increasingly conveyed algorithmically.

Mindfulness of this exogenous arbitration is crucial for an effective human curator. This requires the ability to identify sources and filter information discriminately. But this is a skill set that has not had universal adoption; neither has it been applied with sufficient proficiency—leaving users susceptible to misguidance online. A 2016 executive summary research study conducted by Stanford University entitled *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning* found that even students at this highly selective university were largely unsuccessful in differentiating a reliable and factual website from a propagandist one (Wineburg & McGrew 2016). The investigation saw similar findings across the educational spectrum, from middle school to college. What this suggests is that so called ‘digital nativism’ is not a predictor of judicious computer use.

Relevant to this problem is the field of study known as ‘agnotology’ (Proctor 2008). Agnotology examines how misinformation and ignorance are culturally produced. Societal ignorance can manifest through neglecting to discern and discriminate between sources of information (as Wineburg & McGrew discovered), or as a result of deliberate and sponsored misrepresentation. An example of the latter includes the tobacco industry's marketing campaign to nurture doubt and ignorance about the detrimental health effects of smoking (Proctor 2008: pp. 11-18). The proliferation of ‘fake,’ biased, or propagandist news articles which populate users’ curated newsfeeds on social media sites is also a subject of concern for those studying agnotology and its relationship with curation.

Addressing these concerns in a 2010 executive summary to the Aspen Institute on media literacy, Renee Hobbs voiced a need to promote pedagogical tools to advance the principles of digital and media literacy, including analytical thinking, evaluation, and creative meaning-making. An informed society must encourage a kind of media literacy which fosters critical thinking to allow people to make informed decisions and avoid culturally induced ignorance through misinformation.

The permutations of the (mis-)use and (mis-)management of information which arise from a discussion of discernment matter when data floating on the Internet are transformed into works of curation. While the meaning-making and knowledge-producing aspects are what give curation its power to create and transform narratives around online content, the information management or data collection aspect is equally important. Without prudent filtering of information by its credibility, misinformation becomes infiltrated into curation work, thereby changing the meaning and knowledge that is produced. As misinformation becomes more pervasive, discernment and discrimination become increasingly difficult—and more necessary.

Addressing matters of information management necessitates updated skills, yet new requirements in research practices have not been coherently understood and applied across different fields. Researchers, institutions, and libraries struggle to delineate information management practices in the face of complexities added by metadata, algorithms, analytics, and evolving platforms for learning, teaching and sharing. What may be needed is a standard for information gathering generally and curation practices specifically which are commensurate with the kind of media literacy to which Hobbs refers. The field of Library and Information Science (LIS) has an important part to play here—although the role of librarianship has been made more complex by the integration of data science into the traditional understanding of information gathering and preservation. Some of the implications of this hybridization have been discussed here in terms of media literacy and agnotology. As such, LIS scholars face the added task of establishing standards for the training of curation practices.

Efforts to address these issues of standardization and training have emerged from different contexts—mostly educational—with the goal of defining curation practice and establishing a reliable set of criteria by which to determine if information has been satisfactorily vetted. These efforts have been propelled by the requirements of government and university funding agencies and scholarly societies which judge outcomes by such things as credibility and reproducibility. However, there is still little coordination between groups working on this effort, and few LIS programs offer advanced classes or degrees in Curation. This is despite researchers and research organizations voicing a need for training to deal with the evolving demands of research, the changed landscape of documentation and publication in the digital environment, and the need to comply with government requirements for the management of federally funded research data. The opening this leaves is felt throughout the educational spectrum, leaving researchers and students of all levels ill-prepared for the digital literacy requirements that curation demands.

Conclusion

The key feature which makes curation so consequential is the filtering process that links information to knowledge. When curators apply subjective and evaluative judgments about the relevance of information for a deliberate purpose, they create new knowledge. It is this knowledge-production which makes curation relevant across multiple fields and can position curators as potential agents of change.

To capitalize on the potential for novelty and innovation requires both insight and skill. Because intermediating data filters and agents are not always transparent, such as in the case of algorithms, curation can easily and unknowingly be reincarnated as ignorance. How information is collated and circulated needs to be critically examined as part of any educationally viable approach to digital and media literacy. A critical approach is particularly

important in learning environments where students are lauded as having 'self-organized' their learning via web and computational sources. It is also pressing in light of recent research which finds that student web users are failing to sufficiently differentiate between sources of online information based on reliability.

As society grows skeptical of institutions marketing information and perceived to be biased and operating under agendas, perhaps it is not merely coincidental that over the last generation, museums have secured an increasing position of trust in society (Museums Association, 2013). Museums are acknowledged to have a crucial societal role that is broader than satisfying individual visitors. The role of museums as guardians of reliable information is due in large part to the role of museum curators as *stewards* of information and producers of knowledge. It is this type of stewardship which is relevant and required in online environments for the management of abundant information and knowledge-production. Indeed, institutions of education, politics, and commerce can similarly benefit from securing a position of trust through the employment of prudent and transparent curation practices.

See Also:

ieml0014

ieml0042

ieml0046

ieml0049

ieml0053

ieml0067

ieml0091

ieml0099

ieml0102

ieml0188

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