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Digital Content Curation and Why It Matters to Librarians

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The concept of digital content curation (often referred to simply as digital curation; the term "content" is inserted here to avoid confusion with the work of digital archivists) is an increasingly common phenomenon across the Web. The idea behind curation, sometimes called aggregation, is linking and or excerpting the work of others (Carr 2012). Just as physical curators carefully select material from their collections to display or showcase for visitors, digital curators carefully select electronic content for users, often repackaging it in new ways.

Examples are found on sites like the *Huffington Post* (http://www.huffingtonpost.com), which excerpts work from around the Web, often to the extent that there's no need for users to click through to the original source of the content. Other examples are found on sites like Longreads (http://longreads.com), which links to longform journalism, with the links coming from users tweeting recommendations using the #longreads Twitter hashtag, and Flipboard (http://flipboard.com), a popular mobile application of curated web content that displays in a magazine-like form. Storify (http://www.storify.com) allows users to curate social media, like tweets, YouTube videos, and Facebook posts, and then publish them as a whole work, either on the Storify site or embedded in a webpage.

To a certain extent, the Web has always been about curation, with users sharing links with each other. Many blogs can be considered curated content, with bloggers sharing links and excerpts with readers. The *Drudge Report* (http://drudgereport.com), which has linked to select news articles and sites since the 1990s, can be considered curated news. What's changing online is the amount of content that's being shared versus the amount that's being created. Platforms like Tumblr (http://www.tumblr.com) and Pinterest

(http://pinterest.com) make it very easy for users to share, showcase, and curate content they discover online, without creating new content, even in the form of commentary on the original work.

These digital content curation services, which seek to connect users to selected content, rather than to everything, the way something like a Google search does, can often make it challenging for readers to determine from where the content originated. This becomes an issue for librarians, since most—especially academic ones—spend a fair amount of time teaching users how to evaluate information based on its origins.

A recent Pew Research Center study found that more than 25% of respondents used a news organizing application or website to get their news (Mitchell, Rosentstiel, and Christian 2012a). Many of these news organizing tools could be considered curated or aggregated news, since they are not coming from a single news source, like *The New York Times* website. Something like Google News (http://news.google.com), which uses an algorithm to collect news links from multiple sources, would be an example of an aggregated news site. Interestingly, that same report found less than 10% of respondents were getting their news from Twitter or Facebook, both of which would also represent a social curation of news and information, since users are selectively sharing articles.

One response to the issue of provenance and content curation has been something called the Curator's Code, developed by Maria Popova, a popular online curator, and Kelli Anderson, a designer (Carr 2012). The code uses a symbol to indicate content taken from another source, which translates to "via." There is a also a second symbol to indicate an idea that originated with another source. That translates to HT, or hat tip. These symbols are used to cite content users are posting but that they did not create. The symbols could be used in anything from a blog post to a tweet. Details on the project can be seen at http://curatorscode.org.

The issue of linking is, of course, not a new one. Rudolf Ammann (2011) studied linking patterns in a blogging community, using data from 1998. Within his data, he found three link classifications: endorsement links, which were defined as a weblog post linking to another weblog; list links, which were recommended links that existed apart from a specific post; and link attribution, which was "a credit for a 'borrowed' link to its source, often another weblog" (Amman 2011, 30). The Curator Code is a formalization of link attribution. Interestingly, Ammann reports that in May 1998, blogger Raphael Carter introduced the use of the preposition "via" as a way to indicate link attribution. The Curator Code replaces "via" with a symbol. HTML, the markup language used to build webpages, has a block quote element that is used to offset quotations. That could also be considered another citation tool for users, although it requires some knowledge of HTML.

The issue of digital content curation is also significant to librarians because of the issue of authority. Digital content curation bypasses traditional authority structures, creating a socially constructed authority (Ovadia 2007). Users need to learn how to interpret and understand this authority. *New York Times* reporter David Carr explained the challenge of this changing authority from a journalism perspective: "If you're putting all your stories out there and they're being [spread] frictionlessly on social [media], the hierarchy of importance among various stories is being settled democratically—or algorithmically, with people attached" (Hicks 2012). Carr is referring to hierarchy within a single news source, but the same idea applies to hierarchy, or authority, within multiple sources. The *New York Times* is widely considered to be an authoritative source, but digital content curation makes it possible for a smaller, perhaps less authoritative publication to become a more respected source for a particular story.

Librarians are not the only people interested in the idea of digital content curation. Journalists, like Carr, are also interested because of the impact it is having on their business model and because of how it is challenging the authority of traditional news organizations. Morgan Gibson discussed how many news organizations now have their own curation team, specifically mentioning the team at the *Seattle Times*: "So once the creation team reports and produces brilliant journalism, the curation experts figure out how to deliver that information in the most effective and engaging way across multiple platforms, include the Web, the smartphone, the tablet and, yes, the old printed newspaper" (Gibson 2011, 10). This is an attempt by a specific news organization, but also news organizations in a more general sense, to become digital content curators, allowing them to exert more control over how and where their content is used and presented.

Simon Doyle (2010) has also written about the idea of curation as a contemporary journalism skill. He suggests that journalists can add value to curated content, by verifying facts and even repackaging content, curating the curated, in a sense. This sort of value could be especially helpful from an information literacy perspective, giving users a tool to help evaluate the quality of the information with which they are working.

As mentioned earlier, news organizations have been hit especially hard by the shift toward Web-based news delivery methods. There are many factors in this, including the collapse of the classified advertising market (Mutter 2011), but a significant factor is that in many cases, users can easily get news content without having to pay for it. Social tools like Twitter and Facebook make it very easy for users to share content they find interesting or significant. And while the Pew Research Center survey did not find either service to be a major source for news, they did call social recommendation an emerging trend that could become a primary part of news consumption (Mitchell, Rosentstiel, and Christian 2012b). It raises the interesting

question of why users bother to share news stories over social networks.

Gina Masullo Chen (2011) studied the phenomenon in Twitter (in general, and not limited to news sharing), finding that Twitter users use the service because it gratifies the need to connect with other people.

Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd (2010) also examined Twitter, specifically studying the role of the imagined audience. They reported that some Twitter users approached their tweets as trying to meet the expectations of their followers. Sharing news stories, especially stories connected to a field in which someone is considered to be an expert of some sort, might be considered as conforming to the expectation of followers, or perhaps even acting as a form of public service.

All of this leaves librarians in an interesting position. Content is everywhere, and it is not always clear whether the work is accurate and/or where the work originated. Journalists are trying to position themselves in such a way that they are curating content that they also might have created, and perhaps verifying work they did not create.

But that still presents opportunities for librarians, especially those affiliated with academic institutions, to focus on teaching users how to evaluate information in this new climate. Traditional evaluation, even at its most basic level, usually begins with the idea of who published the information presented. But in a curated world, the publisher is not always evident. Perhaps, then, library instruction could include not only the importance of the publisher, but also how to find out who the actual publisher is, with a focus on working with curated content.

This is also a place where mobile devices might become a factor in evaluation. As more users use mobile devices for content consumption, it can become even more challenging for users to investigate and evaluate the provenance of the content they discover. Users working in front of a large screen with a full keyboard might be inclined to do some clicking and searching to explore a link or piece of information that's come across their monitors. But users on a mobile device, where that sort of exploration can be more time-consuming, and expensive, depending upon a user's service plan, might be less inclined to pursue the origins of something they are reading. If librarians are not able to make this process easier, at the very least, they can emphasize the importance of the activity.

Also, it is perhaps wise to remember that curated content does not mean inherently unreliable content. Instead, it represents another way for users to connect with information—information they might not have found through their usual channels. Curated content can be a way for users to expand their world in a way that might not be possible if they only used a single source for news.

Digital content creation is changing the media landscape but is also presenting some interesting opportunities for librarians. Sharing links is hardly

a new process, but as links become easier to collect and share, users need help learning to separate the high-quality content from the lesser-quality. Librarians can position themselves not just as curators, but as authorities. Librarians can help users learn how to curate, but also how to evaluate curated sources.

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