Curate Me! Exploring online identity through social curation in networked learning

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Abstract

Networked learning theory and the related literature express the importance of access to resources or content, but there is no singular way of discussing these information management processes. On the web, the rise in information abundance has seen the terms curation, digital curation, content curation, and social curation gain in popularity to describe how individual users manage their information intake, processing and sharing. This paper attempts to distinguish between these overlapping terms and argues that the term social curation could describe the information management processes required of networked educators and learners. In addition it proposes a terminology for phases of the social curation process, which may aid networked learners and educators in the adoption and scaffolding of social curation processes for learning.

This paper further explores the distinctive opportunities social curation offers for online identity expression and construction for circumventing known issues such as collapsed contexts and role conflict that occur in other social media sites.

Keywords

curation, social curation, digital curation, networked learning, online identity

Introduction

Today's educators and learners operate in an unprecedented world of information abundance. Google's Eric Schmidt stated in 2010 that we produce as much information in two days as we did from the dawn of man through 2003. And much of that is user-generated content including tweets, images and links. (Siegler, 2010). Those users and the content they generate keep growing. Taking as an example just one platform, Twitter, we see staggering numbers: its monthly active users are up 44% from 2012 to 2013 to 218.3 million users worldwide, who produce approximately 500 million Tweets every day. More importantly, over three months in 2013, those users visited their Twitter timeline 150.9 billion times to discover new content (Twitter Prospectus, 2013). This information explosion and access is being replicated on social networking sites all over the internet.

This information abundance presents individuals with a challenge they have never encountered: how to discover content pertinent to their context. One way people cope with this is by continually checking their news streams, "people graze for info all day". (Rainie, 2012) And this leads to a second problem of information abundance, how to make sense of and organize the content one finds.

How does an individual swim in a sea of information?

Thought leader Clay Shirky posed at the Web2.0 expo in 2008 that what connected individuals are experiencing isn't an information overload problem, but rather a filter failure, our lack of having a process for operating in this new environment (Shirky, 2008). Similarly Howard Rheingold describes the ability to be online without being overloaded with information an "essential ingredient to personal success in the twenty-first century". (2012)

In 2008, as Shirky was wondering what our information filter could look like at the front end, the information gathering or discovery process, librarian and digital curator Neil Beagrie wondered the same for the back end. He noticed a new phenomenon of users creating personal digital collections and projected challenges ahead for individuals in organizing and preserving information, but also in determining how they could share the artefacts they collected effectively to an audience. (Beagrie, 2008)

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Clearly there was a need for a description of this new behaviour and cognitive tools to support it. And for those of us working in education, questions arise as to how this fits into learning. How has this behaviour been described in networked learning theories until now?

Views on information access and sharing in networked learning

The importance of learning resources and how the networked learning actors discover, access and interact with those resources appears repeatedly in the literature around networked learning.

The learning resources are seen as objects that can be readily accessed, as stated in the 2004 definition:

> "Networked learning is learning in which information and communications (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources." (Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson, & McConnell, 2004)

Siemens and Weller envisage a "reduced resistance to information flow" in networks in juxtaposition to "one-way flow of content" in traditional university learning management systems (LMSs)(2011). And this appears to be a distinct difference of networked learning, particularly when discussed from a higher education perspective. All participants, learners and educators, can contribute to information gathering and sharing as opposed to the broadcast model of traditional university teaching, in which the teacher has control over the information resources in the university controlled learning space, the learning management system or repository. (Lankshear and Nobel, 2007; Stewart, 2013)

In Leernetwerken, van der Klink et al. describe the types of learning activities that take place within learning networks. Two of these activities are centered around information, learning by finding and studying information, and learning by adding new information. (van der Klink et al., 2011)

Rita Kop cites serendipity and human mediation as critical factors in information gathering by networked learners. She closely examined students' information finding and sharing behaviours during the PLENK2010 MOOC. In this MOOC teacher presence was naturally low due to the environment and the sheer student numbers. Kop asserts that this means special attention needs to be given to the information aggregation strategies and that these cannot be only institution or teacher directed. In this instance, two tools stood out in the students' participation in information aggregation, Twitter and RSS readers, which provided students with an information stream outside of the LMS. Through this students shared links, videos, articles and other learning resources, some that could be found inside the course, but others that the students had found themselves and had shared with course participants as they saw a relationship to the course. The researchers found that this human mediation in turn led to serendipitous information discovery, as for instance a student could see a retweet by someone she followed, that originated with someone not in her Twitter network. (Kop, 2012)

But what do we call this new behaviour?

So the importance for a networked educator or learner to interact with learning resources is well stated and of importance, but referred to in turn as connecting to learning resources, information flow, information gathering, information sharing, information aggregation, and in other works by other names. We do not appear to have a consistent way of referring to this new behaviour we expect our networked learners to display.

The Rise of Curation

On the web, as internet users struggled with information abundance with the advent of Web2.0, a term has arisen for their coping behaviour as well as cognitive tools to support this behaviour.

Towards a definition of curation

Since 2010 Google Trends shows a rise in the terms curation and its derivatives, social curation, content curation and digital curation, as seen in figure 1, below.

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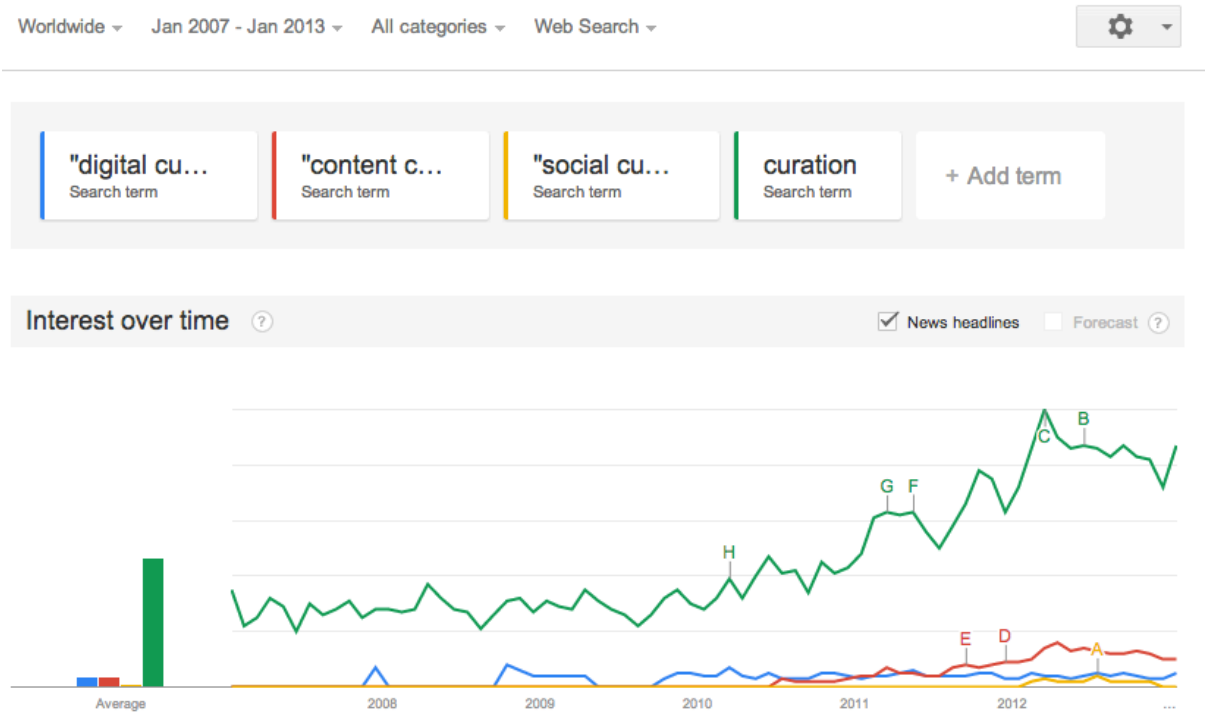

Figure 1: Google Trends for curation and its derivatives

However the definition of what curation is, varies. An EDUCAUSE publication aimed at educators is pithy and describes social content curation as "the collection, display, and labelling of information" ("7Things…", 2012). Maria Popova, the internet's favourite curator, describes the work of curators more lyrically: "In a culture of "information overload,…it's through these very nodes in the information ecosystem, these human sense-makers, that this very text or image or video finds its way into our scope of attention." (2011)

In 2010, internet entrepreneur Robert Scoble blogged a call for purpose-made curation tools to let a curator set up a collection of content from diverse sources, re-organize and re-editorialize that content to add perspective, and then publish the resulting bundle. (Scoble, 2010)

Atoms or Artefacts?

Both Scoble and the EDUCAUSE article broaden the scope of what can be curated from mere "information" to the wider concept of "content" including text, images, videos and links. Scoble coins the term "atoms" to describe items that can be curated, with resulting bundles called molecules (2010). However the term that is now in vogue is 'artefacts', a term symmetrically borrowed like 'curation' from the museum world.

Distinction of social curation from digital curation and content curation

At this point, it would be helpful to make a distinction between digital curation, social curation and content curation. Digital curation is generally aimed at preservation and management of data and information artefacts, and is the work of data specialists, such as librarians or archivists, usually coordinated by an organisation. The intended audience or users of the data that is curated is unknown, and the collection is intended to exist indefinitely. (Beagrie, 2008).

By contrast social curation is the discovery, collection and sharing of digital objects like links, pictures, videos by an individual for a social purpose. Compare it to a curator at a museum of history, cataloguing and safekeeping a collection of vases for future generations to study, observe and reuse in various exhibitions for the

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public, versus a person selecting a few vases to display on a sideboard for their personal safekeeping and enjoyment, and for visitors, friends and colleagues to enjoy.

Social curation is also different from 'content curation', a term that is often used to describe the remixing of content for marketing and search engine optimization purposes for businesses.

Duh et al. (2011) carried out a study into Twitter curation tool, Togetter after the 2011 Earthquake in Japan and found a wide variety of social purposes for the Togetter lists, from summarizing an event, to gathering complex information and discussing tv shows. They distinguish social curation by "the manual effort involved in organizing social media content, and in this sense it differs from automatic methods like algorithmic search/aggregation. This human factor means that curated stories may be more personalized, relevant, and interesting to read."

In examining curation practices on Pinterest, Hall and Zarro define Pinterest as a social curation site because it combines social media features with collecting capabilities. (2012)

However we can take a larger view of social curation, beyond the social quality of the artefacts shared, the social networking capabilities of the tools used, or the human intervention needed. Social curation has a social purpose. We can then propose a definition of social curation as the discovery, selection, collection and sharing of digital artefacts by an individual for a social purpose such as learning, collaboration, identity expression or community participation.

Four phases of social curation

Having a language and a framework can aid in the adoption of social curation practices by networked learners and educators. Social curation is a complex process involving multiple platforms and curator actions, depending on the curator's preferences. Despite these differences, the process always has four phases: discovery, selection, collection and sharing.

Discovery

To discover artefacts to curate, a curator must set up information streams and monitor these regularly, to come across artefacts to share. In this phase the curator has basically three tasks. Set up information streams, monitor those streams and tweak the streams by changing parameters, setting up additional streams or disregarding information streams. Popova mentions Twitter in this context as a "discovery platform" (Popova, 2011) but these information streams can be many and diverse: Facebook pages one is subscribed to, Twitter lists or Google alerts, RSS readers with subscribed RSS feeds or Flipboard feeds and magazines. The information streams a learner sets up can be distributed over many platforms, and checked from many devices through a web interface or through an app, however they have one thing in common. The curator sets them up purposefully. They decide topics, hashtags or contexts they want to explore, and set up information streams accordingly.

Selection

This phase is the only phase not facilitated by technology. Selection is an internal decision on the part of a curator to collect and/or share an artefact, because it fits within their interests or contexts. This will provide an interesting avenue for research in future.

Collection

In this phase the curator adds the discovered artefact to a cluster of artefacts. What these clusters are named depends on the curation platform. On Pinterest a cluster is a "Pinboard" or "board", on Storify a Story and a Topic on Scoop.It. In these platforms, the main aim is for these clusters or boards to be public, though they can be set to private. However, there are also curation platforms such as Pocket and Evernote, that are private by default, with the option to share collections later. How and why learners choose certain platforms and for which curation phases will be a topic of further study.

It is at the collection phase that the curator has their first opportunity to add value to an artefact by providing their own perspective. Adding the voice of the curator is an action that sets curation apart from simple bookmarking or aggregation (Scoble, 2010; Popova, 2011; Duh et al., 2013) This curator perspective can be added at many different levels. When setting up a cluster, the curator gives it a title, so even the act of simply adding an artefact to a particularly named collection can signify why the curator thinks this artefact is valuable.

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However there are more explicit actions a curator can take, like tagging an artefact with specific words, adding comments or placing it within a narrative structure among other artefacts, as one often sees journalists do with Storify.

Sharing

Sharing should be seen as a separate phase, as it is a decision that is made by the curator. However, when publishing to a public cluster, as curators do in Pinterest and Scoop.It, the act of collection actually coincides with the act of sharing. Collection = sharing. In other platforms like Storify an entire cluster can be prepared, before being shared.

Many curation tools also allow sharing a link to a clustered artefact into other popular platforms, like Twitter, or LinkedIn. This frees the artefact for discoverability in other platforms but also in other subject contexts, while retaining the link and metadata that makes the original curator and their clusters findable.

The social curation process and curation tools provide different opportunities to networked learning participants from the tools and environments that are usually described in networked learning, such as blogs, Twitter, wikis and LMSs, particularly in the area of online identity expression.

Social curation and online identity

Social curation practices and tools allow networked learners new opportunities for online identity expression, which can circumvent some known issues with other social media tools.

Social curation for impression management

In 2010, Bernie Hogan noted that Goffman's Presentation of Self theory was increasingly being applied to social media activities. Particularly Goffman's idea of impression management, "selective disclosure of personal details designed to present an idealized self" was very popular under social media researchers. (Hogan, 2010) In most SNSs impression management is done through a focus on the careful selection of personal information, personal updates and/or personal artefacts. In social curation, the curator focuses on the sharing of mostly third-party information in order to describe one's interests, work or contexts. In other words, it is self presentation by proxy. And perhaps this can make it more appealing to networked learners or educators who are new to social media, or wary of sharing personal information in public and semi-public forums.

This is not to say there are no opportunities for the sharing of personal information or personal commentary in curation platforms. Social content curation tools fall within the description of SNSs as described by boyd & Ellison:

> web-based services that allow individuals to
> (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,
> (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
> (3) view and traverse their lists of connections and those made by others within the system. (2007)

However in social curation tools, the connection as described under 2, can be indirect. Rather than creating a direct relationship, such as a "friend" relationship in Facebook or "follower" on Twitter, users can choose not to link each other's profiles and connect to each others collections of artefacts instead. Similarly, the lists of connections under 3 can also be indirect, eg on Pinterest a user can find new users by tracking which 'boards' an established connection already follows. So although all three criteria are valid for social curation platforms, these platforms encourage exploration through artefacts and clusters of artefacts, rather than social connections and personal information. In fact, Hall and Zarro found in their Pinterest study that social interactions are very artefact-focused. (2012)

In a curation platform, a user can practice impression management by filing out their profile and setting up an avatar. But far more important is how they express themselves through their clusters. In Pinterest, users give interesting names to their Pinboards and can choose cover pictures for these artefact clusters. All of this is displayed much more prominently on the site, than the user's profile information.

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Further opportunity for impression management occurs with every artefact curated, as a curator has the opportunity to add value. This occurs in different ways in different platforms. Storify allows the curator to add text commentary around artefacts. It is also one of the few curation platforms that allows users to reorganize the order of artefacts, and so even the order can be a form of impression management. In Scoop.It, with each 'scoop', a curator can add a description (which can be quite lengthy but usually aren't), and even edit the notifications that get pushed out to other connected platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Social curation for presentation of self through exhibition

Hogan (2010) goes on to re-examine the difference between performance of self and exhibition of self, the latter being a construction of artefacts.

> One of the key distinctions between exhibitions and performances is that performances are subject to continual observation and self-monitoring as the means for impression management, whereas exhibitions are subject to selective contributions and the role of a third party. I refer to this third party as a curator that has the capacity to filter, order, and search content. (Hogan, 2010)

Hogan argues that social media participation is better analysed through the exhibition metaphor as in almost all these interactions artefacts like chat transcripts, pictures, Tweets etc, are left behind, either consciously by the user or through ignorance by the user of the trail they leave behind.

Although Hogan mentions the existence of a curator, to him this is confusingly a third party that filters, orders and searches content.

If we apply these ideas to social curation platforms, we can see that the curator is definitely the one in charge of the artefacts in the exhibition, and the order in which they are displayed. In fact the ability to create different clusters of artefacts in most curation platforms, means that a user can set up different exhibitions intended for different audiences and contexts. A Pinterest user can maintain many Pinboards with different themes. Scoop.It allows curators to set up a maximum of five Topics on a free account. The delineation between exhibitions in social curation platforms is more explicit than the use of different hashtags in Twitter, or different categories on a blog, though even in social curation these boundaries between contexts are not solid.

The above may also point to a possible role for social curation platforms in helping avoid or mediate the risk of collapsed contexts (boyd, 2007), namely that a user may not fully participate in an effort to cater to the lowest common denominator of multiple audience (Hogan, 2010).

Social curation to mitigate the risk of role conflict

In SNSs, participants can have multiple roles. This is something that both networked learners and educators struggle with. Neil Selwyn describes this role conflict for students on Facebook, and describes how their communication and participation in the social process and in the learning process can be subdued when a parent or teacher engages in what they consider a personal space. Siemens and Weller talk about the need for universities to avoid the "creepy treehouse" phenomenon and ask: "How best, then, can educators utilize the potentional of these tools without destroying what makes them valuable to students?"(2011)

Social curation tools may hold one answer. There is a distance that is created through the setup of curation tools and their focus on interactions around artefacts and artefact clusters rather than the curator. Also the ability to set up multiple exhibitions holds the potential for learners or educators to establish different spaces for different roles, circumventing the 'creepiness' of mixed spaces.

iCollaborate: a role redefinition for learners and teachers

An interesting case study in which the potential of social curation practices on role definitions was detected is the iCollaborate project by Buchem et al. (2011). Media students and teachers in the project were guided by the researchers to collaborate in global communities of practice for a form of networked learning. As a result the researchers observed "participant ontological shifts: Lecturers reconceptualise their roles from content experts to facilitators of student-generated content and student-generated learning contexts; Students reconceptualise their roles from passive receptors of knowledge to active participants generating content and context within authentic

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learning environments and in this way negotiating and co-creating curricula." (Buchem et al., 2011) In other words, how participants see their relationship to information exchange affects how they interpret their role in the learning process. What can happen when we begin to encourage learners to think of themselves as curators?

Conclusion

In this paper, the author has identified that within the networked learning community, we do not currently have a consistent way of referring to the information practices we desire our networked learners and educators to display. As shown the term "curation" has gained in popularity on the web to describe various information accessing, filtering, collection and sharing practices. It is proposed that the term social curation would accurately describe various information practices in networked learning. Four phases of the social curation process have been described to aid in its adoption: discovery, selection, collection and sharing. We then explored how the emphasis that is placed on artefacts and artefact clusters in social curation, may aid in circumventing some issues in online participation and online identity expression in current social learning practices by networked learners and educators.

As it was exploratory in nature, this paper provides many avenues for further investigation:

- What activities do learners and educators undertake in the four phases of social curation and which tools do they use? How do they link these together? With what frequency do they curate?
- What are the social curation possibilities and limitations that exist within institutional learning management systems?
- How do educators and learners move between institutional LMSs and curation platforms?
- How do educators and learners express their identity through curation, and for which other contexts do they curate?
- Is it possible that social curation tools with their emphasis on artefacts can be a gateway to scaffold educators and learners to SNSs that require more social and identity expression?

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