# Attention Doesn't Scale: The Role of Content Curation in Membership Associations

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# Problem: Information Overload

> "*The total amount of information created on the world's electronic devices is expected to surpass the zettabyte mark this year.*[1]"

A zettabyte is one TRILLION gigabytes, or $10^{21}$ bytes.

To put it in more quantifiable terms, a zettabyte is equal to 250 BILLION DVD movies.[2]

That's a lot of information to process. And it's not a new problem. In researching the topic of information overload, we found articles in Google Scholar dating back to the early 1990s, when many of our organizations were just publishing our very first "here's our brochure, only electronic!" websites. Indeed, in the first century C.E., Seneca the Elder remarked that "the abundance of books is a distraction."[3] And that was nearly 1400 years before Gutenberg.

The concept of information overload was originated by futurist Alvin Toffler in his 1970 book *Future Shock*[4] as part of his depiction of a world in

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1. *Boston Globe,* http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/11/28/information_overload_the_early_years/
2. Cisco SP360: Service Provider blog, http://blogs.cisco.com/tag/zettabyte/
3. HP Technology at Work eNewsletter, http://h30458.www3.hp.com/ww/en/smb/1230424.html
4. Fast Company, http://www.fastcompany.com/1694890/future-shock-40-tofflers-stir-cyberdust-new-scenarios

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which the rate of change would accelerate to the point that governments, society, and individuals would be unable to keep up – would, in fact, be "future shocked."

The new wrinkle is that, while it was always possible for any given individual to publish to the web (assuming, in the early days, she could find a hosting service and learn to write HTML code), technology now makes it simple for anyone and everyone to publish rich multimedia content from virtually anywhere at virtually any time. Hence the zettabyte problem mentioned above, which is estimated to cost the US economy as much as 25% of the average knowledge worker's day to lost productivity, which adds up to a $900 billion drain on the economy.[5]

But the problem of information overload is not only about quantity of information. It's also a problem of quality and format.[6] Widely varying formats make it difficult for us to scan and quickly assimilate new information, as we don't automatically know where the key point lies in any given source, and we often have trouble determining the veracity of a source, particularly a new source.[7]

But no matter how much information is available – and by 2015, it would take an individual five years to view all the video content that will be transmitted every second[8] – it is still the case that people have the same 24 hours in a day they've always had.

In the meantime, the role of the passionate hobbyist in contributing to the global store of information has changed dramatically. Although the Internet still supports a wide variety of dubious sources, who may or may not know much about the topics they write about, the famous 2005 study in the journal *Nature* demonstrated that on scientific topics, Wikipedia was as accurate as the venerable *Encyclopedia Britannica*,[9] which in March of this year, ceased print publication after nearly 250 years.[10] The passionate hobbyists, at least in some areas, have won the day.

With 250 billion DVDs worth of information, some of which is as good as or better than what your association can provide (and in any case, is nearly always provided more quickly), vying for a piece of your members' 24 daily hours, what is the role of associations in an information-rich but attention-poor world?

5. Basex: TechWatch, http://www.basexblog.com/2008/12/19/information-overload-now-900-billion-what-is-your-organizations-exposure/

6. Association for Computing Machinery Digital Library, http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=500302

7. Infogineering, http://www.infogineering.net/understanding-information-overload.htm

8. Cisco SP360: Service Provider blog, http://blogs.cisco.com/tag/zettabyte/

9. *Nature,* http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v438/n7070/full/438900a.html

10. *Encyclopedia Britannica* blog, http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2012/03/change/

# Solution: **Content Curation**

> **"** *It's not information overload. It's filter failure.* **"**
>
> Clay Shirky, Web 2.0 Expo[11]

## What is content curation?

When most of us think of the concept of "curation," the first thing that comes to mind is museums, and that's a useful place to start.

A museum curator is responsible for a number of intertwined activities: researching a topic, acquiring a large number of objects related to that topic, selecting the particular objects to display together, providing interpretation so that the artifacts tell a comprehensible story, sharing that story in a display, and then taking ongoing physical care of the resulting installation.

Content curation, according to Beth Kanter, is the process of seeking relevant, high-quality information, adding a level of sense-making to it, and then sharing the results.[12]

Information overload is not only a factor of volume. It's also heavily influenced by the fact that the large disparity in the sources of incoming information leads to an even larger disparity in the topics and focus of the information. We have plenty of data – too much, in fact – but we lack meaning, a sense of how all the streams of information coming in fit together to point us to wise decision-making. The curator adds context, trust, and meaning to that previously disaggregated mass of stuff.

## Types of Curation:

There are five generally accepted types of content curation:[13]

1. **Aggregation,** which is analogous to being an *archivist.* The aggregator seeks to gather ALL the relevant content about a particular topic in one location. Aggregation is about collection, not interpretation. It's the most common form of curation, but probably the least useful. Most "list of resources" type blog posts are aggregation curation.
2. **Distillation,** which is the role of our *museum curator.* In this instance, the curator first gathers, like the aggregator, but then condenses the mass of information into a coherent story, providing not just a litany of resources of varying quality, but actual meaning. Many infographics are a result of distillation.
3. **Elevation** is about *trend-spotting.* This happens when the curator is deeply immersed in the daily milieu of a given topic and thus can spot a larger change in the zeitgeist as it arises. This is particularly popular among technology trend-spotting websites like Techmeme and Mashable.
4. **Mashups** are created by *artists,* who take extant works and combine them to create something entirely new. Most commonly thought of in regards to music (combining a vocal track from one song with an instrumental track from another), it's a major movement in most of the arts, although it carries with it certain inherent intellectual property problems.

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11. blip, http://blip.tv/web2expo/web-2-0-expo-ny-clay-shirky-shirky-com-it-s-not-information-overload-it-s-filter-failure-1283699
12. Kanter on Slideshare, http://www.slideshare.net/kanter/the-unanticipated-benefits-of-content-curation
13. Influential Marketing blog, http://www.rohitbhargava.com/2011/03/the-5-models-of-content-curation.html

(For more on the IP issues surrounding mashups, see Lawrence Lessig's TED talk, "Laws That Choke Creativity."[14]

5. **Chronology** is done by *historians,* who place events in a timeline to show the progression of a topic or idea. Chronology is another popular infographic format.

The above are all about *what kind* of curation is happening. We can also consider *who* is doing the curation. There are three main choices: algorithmic curation, social curation, and expert curation. Algorithmic curation is done automatically by computers running algorithms to try to decide what is the most relevant information on a given topic. In other words, Google. Google, as we all know, uses a complex series of mathematical equations to determine where a given website should fall in the list returned when someone enters a search term. The problem, or at least a problem, with that approach is that computers can be fooled.

Social and expert curation rely on humans. Social curation is curation by crowdsourcing, with many people sharing the aggregation and curation of content across a variety of social platforms. Digg[15] and Reddit[16] are both examples of social curation at work. But without a responsible authority, social curation can quickly devolve into little more than a popularity contest.

Expert curation occurs when an actual human being who is, theoretically, an expert in a given topic, weighs the quality of the information presented in making her source selections. Expert curation can also include an editorial element, in which the expert not only judges content for quality but also provides a point of view. Robin Good[17] does editorial expert curation on a large number of topics, including content curation itself.

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14. "Laws That Choke Creativity," http://www.ted.com/talks/larry_lessig_says_the_law_is_strangling_creativity.html

15. Digg, http://www.digg.com

16. Reddit, http://www.reddit.com

17. Robin Good, http://www.masternewmedia.org/

# Content Curation and Membership Associations, or "So What?"

*"Information overload is a symptom of over consumption and the inability to refine online experiences based on interest and importance."*
Brian Solis[18]

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Historically, one of the main functions associations have filled for our members was to be one of the major, if not *the* major, authoritative sources of information for our professions or industries. In other words, we provided thought leadership for our members through the unique, original information we produced and shared with them.

But that's no longer necessarily the case.

There are exceptions. Passionate hobbyists, or even experts who produce quality content for free for the love of the topic, cannot duplicate everything. But they can replace much of what associations produce at near-equivalent or better quality and certainly more rapidly.

Content curation provides a potential path to a new type of thought leadership, one that is more suited to a world where information is no longer the scarce resource. Focus is. Meaning is. Wisdom is.

But that type of support will require a significant shift in our business models. For decades, associations have been in the business of generating information. Our challenge now is to transform ourselves into being in the business of *sense-making,* helping members distinguish what new information is most relevant and integrate that information into their mental categories, and *meaning-making,* helping them understand the implications of that new information for their worldviews. To return to our museum curator, sense-making is the process of selecting

and categorizing artifacts. Meaning-making is the process of making decisions about how those artifacts contribute to the overall story.

Our audiences need our help. But they need it in non-traditional ways. They need our assistance learning to think clearly and creatively when surrounded by ambiguity and complexity. They need our aid placing what is happening in the world around them in context so they can ascertain potential implications, determine the most likely outcomes, and plan appropriately. And they need to be able to make good decisions, personally and professionally, in a sometimes-chaotic climate.

This shift will require changes in the way we *think* as organizations and in the way we *act* towards our audiences.

*"Conversation is king. Content is just something to talk about."*
Cory Doctorow[19]

Associations' traditional communications mode has been one of one-to-many broadcasting with centralized messaging and control. Our new mode will need to shift to becoming that of the many-to-many facilitator of conversations.

Our traditional relationship model has been largely transactional. Members pay for a certain set of benefits, which we provide to them at a cost which we hopefully

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18.  Brian Solis blog, http://www.briansolis.com/2012/05/the-fallacy-of-information-overload/

19.  Social Media Today, http://socialmediatoday.com/wordspring/152636/why-conversation-not-content-king

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agree together is fair, while also supporting a certain amount of community good, which the association also provides. Our new relationship model will need to shift to one of richer understanding and genuine empathy for their hopes, fears, needs, and desires, as well as deep engagement with them that reaches far beyond a mere business transaction.

We will have to let our members into our organizations in meaningful ways, as co-creators of new kinds of value, not passive recipients of the same old stuff. We must demonstrate that we are worthy of their attention, and one way to do that is by helping them with the filtering, focus, and clarity that are increasingly difficult to come by in our zettabyte world – in other words, by content curation.

## So how do we do it?

On a practical level, transitioning to a content curation model will require seeking and nurturing new skills in our staff members.

But what skills?

The Institute for the Future at the University of Phoenix Research Institute recently released *Future Work Skills 2020*,[20] a study designed to look at how we think about work, what constitutes work, and the skills we will need to be productive over the coming decade. The skills they identified include:

1. Sense-making: the ability to determine significance.
2. Social intelligence: the ability to connect with others in a deep way.
3. Adaptive thinking: the ability to come up with novel solutions.
4. Cross-cultural competency: the ability to operate in new contexts.
5. Computational thinking: the ability to think abstractly and make data-driven decisions.
6. New media literacy: the ability to assess new media critically and use it appropriately.
7. Transdisciplinarity: the ability to understand concepts across a wide range of disciplines.
8. Design mindset: the ability to understand how the physical environment impacts thinking and make conscious choices in using it.
9. Cognitive load management: the ability to filter information.
10. Virtual collaboration: the ability to be a productive part of a virtual team.

Several of these – sense-making, new media literacy, transdisciplinarity, and cognitive load management – are particularly critical for successful curation.

Robin Good, who, according to Beth Kanter is "The Best Curator on the Planet," breaks curation greatness[21] down into someone who:

- Optimizes
- Edits
- Formats
- Selects
- Excerpts
- Writes
- Classifies
- Links
- Personalizes
- Vets
- Credits
- Filters
- Taps
- Suggests
- Searches
- Scouts
- Hacks Filters and Searches
- Is Transparent
- Recommends
- Crowdsources

That's a somewhat daunting list, but with the right training, and the right tools and processes in place, these tasks can become as natural as answering an email. And remember that 20 years ago, most people didn't know how to do that. The full article in which these skills are listed is excellent, far more extensive, and well worth reading.

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20. Future Work Skills 2020, http://www.iftf.org/futureworkskills2020
21. Robin Good, http://www.masternewmedia.org/what-makes-a-great-curator-great/

# What Does Skilled Content Curation Look Like?

## The American Chemical Society Chemical Abstracts Service[22]

The Chemical Abstracts Service employs a volunteer group of more than 1,000 scientists world-wide who assemble, curate, analyze, and quality check more than 1.5 million patents, journal articles, and other disclosed research sources, totaling more than 35 million indexed records.

## Multiview[23] and SmartBrief[24]

Both of these services provide industry-specific enewsletters on a wide variety of topics. The weekly (Multiview) or daily (SmartBrief) selections are made by human editors from an enormous variety of original sources. The editors write brief descriptions of each selected resource to help their audiences understand why each entry is relevant to them.

## GigaOM[25]

GigaOM offers research and analysis on emerging technologies and the disruption of media. They cover cloud computing, mobile technology, green technology, the Internet, and the media.

# Conclusion

The amount of information that's available to our audiences is increasing exponentially every single day. With so many people involved in creating and sharing information online, our members' filters can quickly become overwhelmed, particularly given the wide variety of formats with which they interact regularly and the even more widely varying level of quality of that information, much of which can be difficult and time-consuming to verify.

At the same time, our members have a finite amount of attention they can devote to assimilating and processing information in a given day. And that cannot increase, no matter how much more information is available to be processed and assimilated.

One way out of this quandary is for associations to refocus our efforts and resources away from our traditional, broadcast, information-creating role and towards content curation. We can help our audiences acquire the tools and develop the skills they need to focus, to make sense of our complex and often ambiguous world, to understand context and find meaning, and ultimately to make better decisions, both personally and professionally.

This will require a change in our fundamental organizational approach to the world, a new set of skills among our staff members, and a new type of relationship with our members and the other audiences we serve. But, if we can successfully make that leap, we can establish a new type of thought leadership suited to twenty-first century needs and capabilities.

22. American Chemical Society Chemical Abstracts Service, http://www.cas.org/
23. Multiview, http://multiview.com/
24. Smart Brief, http://www.smartbrief.com/index.jsp
25. GigaOM, http://gigaom.com/

# Questions for Reflection

- Is our current experience of information overload merely a difference in quantity (see above Seneca the Elder quote), or is it an actual difference in kind? Has technology changed more than just the amount of information available?

- What are your own personal experiences with information overload? Filter failure?

- What are the professional areas in which your members and other audiences are experiencing particular overload stress? How could your association best use curation skills to help ameliorate that stress?

- Which of the five types of content curation would be most useful for your members and other audiences?

- Who would be most effective curator of information for your members (algorithm, social, expert/editorial)?

- How can your staff acquire the skills to do curation efficiently and effectively?

- How can you engage your members in the process of content curation?

- What method(s) of delivery would your members find most useful for the content you've curated for them?

# Additional Resources

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# About Elizabeth Weaver Engel

Elizabeth Weaver Engel, CEO and Chief Strategist at Spark Consulting LLC, has 15 years experience in association management. Although her primary focus has been in membership, marketing, and communications, her experience has been wide-ranging, including corporate sponsorship and fundraising, technology planning and implementation, social media and Internet strategy, budgeting, volunteer management, publications, and governance.

Spark is a boutique consulting firm that provides strategic membership and marketing consulting for associations that have the willingness and capacity at both the staff and board levels to ask themselves tough questions and take some risks in service of reaching for big goals. Forget settling for incremental growth by making minor changes to what you're doing - we're going to uncover and solve the root problems that are holding your association back!

Prior to launching Spark, Elizabeth consulted in online campaigns and marketing and in Internet and social media strategy for Beaconfire Consulting, and in a wide range of subject areas in association management in the not-for-profit consulting practice at RSM McGladrey, Inc. She has also served associations directly in a variety of positions, including Director of Member Services and IT, Vice President of Marketing, and Acting CEO.

Elizabeth combines a focus on finding and implementing creative solutions with a broad understanding of the association sphere. Throughout her career, she has excelled at increasing revenue, public presence, and member satisfaction while decreasing costs through a focus on the efficient and effective use of staff and technology to serve organizational goals and constituents.

Elizabeth maintains close connections to the association community through her affiliation and volunteer work with ASAE. Elizabeth is a Certified Association Executive and holds a Master's degree in government and foreign affairs from the University of Virginia.

# About Jeff De Cagna

Jeff De Cagna is chief strategist and founder of Principled Innovation LLC and the association community's leading voice for innovation. After serving as an association executive for more than a decade, Jeff founded Principled Innovation LLC in 2002 to challenge association leaders to pursue the generative work of transformation. He is an author, speaker and advisor to associations across North America and around the world.

Jeff is an ASAE Fellow, and has served the association community throughout his career in a variety of formal and informal roles. In 2010, Jeff retired from the ASAE: The Center for Association Leadership Board of Directors after serving a three-year term, and he is a past chair of ASAE's Executive Management Section Council. Jeff is a member of American Mensa, BoardSource and the World Future Society, and in 2009, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (UK). He serves on the American

Tinnitus Association Board of Directors, and as vice chair of the Board of Directors of RedRover, a national organization that focuses on bringing animals out of crisis and strengthening the bond between people and animals.

Jeff is the founder of Association Chat (#assnchat) on Twitter and executive producer of the Principled Innovation Blog and Podcast. He is one of the "Five Independent Thinkers" who wrote the groundbreaking book, We Have Always Done It That Way: 101 Things About Associations We Must Change, and the author of the provocative e-book, Associations Unorthodox: Six Really Radical Shifts Toward the Future.

A graduate of the Johns Hopkins and Harvard universities, Jeff has pursued executive education at the MIT Sloan School of Management and the University of Oxford Saïd Business School.