

The Hack-able Curator Project

“Taking the curator out of curating?”

Concept

The concept is to question the singular subjective role of the curator and question whether it is possible, by hacking a preconceived curatorial process, to democratize that process.

Technical Description

A robotic curator is able to select images from Flickr using a preselected set of tags. The images from this resource pool are presented on a screen 9 at a time; from these, the robot, via a software algorithm, is able to make a selection of one or more of them that fit its curatorial criteria. The images are then displayed on a web site (this site may be accessible in the art centre via separate interface). This system represents the curator.

Anyone is able to add images into the resource pool by uploading them to Flickr and ensuring certain tags are added to the image. You may also vote on any images displayed on the website, by sending an SMS to the system. These votes are then fed back into the system and inform the future choices of the 'curator'. These 2 mechanisms represent the notion of hacking the curatorial system.

Much of what Steve Dietz writes about in “Curating (on) the Web” has to do with the nature of digital media; it’s inherent qualities that make much of the traditional understanding of the role of the curator problematic.

If a curator is one who engages in the practice of curation i.e. the selection, organization and maintenance of items in a collection or exhibition, then how is that role understood within the context of digital media? How, for instance, do you make qualitative choices on what to select? How, do you maintain a digital piece? Should you maintain it at all?

The Hack-able Curator Project ¹was conceived as a tool for exposing some of these questions, if not actually seeking to answer any of them!

¹ <http://hackablecurator.org.uk>

For me the key link to explore with regard to the curation of digital media, is with the online social networking sites, such as YouTube², MySpace³, Flickr⁴ and Del.icio.us⁵.

Flickr is a photo sharing web site; users are able to upload their own photos, tag them and share them with anyone or restricted groups. They are also able to add photos into groups and pools, and to select other people's photos (on Flickr) and tag them and select them as favourites. In the same way, and with much the same tools, YouTube does this for video content.

Clearly there are parallels between the process of curation and the activity of users on these sites; perhaps nowhere more so than through the favourites feature of Flickr. Many of the pages of 'favourited' photos of individual users could be positioned as, for example, explorations of themes.

I would like to focus on two significant areas of difference between such sites and the 'traditional' process of curation: Tagging (adding keywords to a given object e.g. Flickr photo) and Social Networks.

Firstly, tagging; because these keywords are by their nature subjective, they offer a different perspective on the content than a traditional taxonomy, which is, or at least is positioned as, objective.

The repeated tagging by users of a particular object could be understood to be the democratic selection and organisation of a number of objects within a given theme (a theme which may perhaps be chosen by the addition of those object to a particular group).

The Hack-able Curator used tags as both the initial seed for its search and as the basis for the criteria on which a photo was chosen. The notion being that by influencing the popular and unpopular tags, the initially fairly random process of choosing would become less random and increasingly reflect the choice of those voting; thus becoming more 'democratic' – a reflection of the spectrum of subjective opinion.

It is of course flawed. It is flawed in the same way that all the tagging systems, especially those using 'tag clouds', are flawed as representations of popularity: a featured popular item, will remain featured, simply because it has more prominence. Likewise the most popular tags will likely remain popular because they get more exposure.

² <http://youtube.com>

³ <http://myspace.com>

⁴ <http://flickr.com>

⁵ <http://del.icio.us>

This does not diminish the notion of curation within social networking sites, but does show that the curator is far from redundant.

Actually, for me one of the most interesting outcomes of the project was as an unintentional social experiment.

When each photo was chosen, a message was posted in the comments for that photo with instructions on how to remove it from the project. During the time that the project was running, a handful of people per day clicked the remove me link and then emailed saying they had done so by accident. Obviously it suggests that the wording was not quite obvious enough, but it also suggests that people don't really read ... they just click!

When we are talking about democratising the curating process, how do we understand the influence on the choosing criteria of mistakes?

In the end, I feel that the project, although moderately successful in beginning to open up some dialogue about the issues surrounding the curation of digital media, failed really to ask some more fundamental questions; such as whether as 'old' media becomes democratised through 'new' media such as blogs, and photo sharing, and we are engulfed by an exponential increase in media, the need for professional curators actually increases not diminishes.

*In all this, there is, in my view, a problem about the assumed democratic nature of this new networked method for curating the immaterial. Can a democratic, read collaborative community, effectively curate through partly automated self-generative digital filter-feeding? Is it not inherently problematic to argue that these largely amateur curators are democratic information managers while professional curators are authoritarian gate-keepers? Is the issue of curatorship really ultimately reducible to control versus freedom?*ⁱ

Certainly for me, there is no reducing the issue of curatorship.

Time Magazine named 'You' their person of the year for 2006ⁱⁱ and before that, the music magazine "Trash" proclaimed in 2003,

*That's because you know already; the Next Big Thing is you. You own your culture.*ⁱⁱⁱ

User generated content and for that matter curatorship is here to stay, but not because curators are authoritarian gatekeepers whilst amateurs are democratic information managers; more that the problems have less to do with control versus freedom or the folksonomy versus the taxonomy or democratic versus autocratic curation.

We still need curators to glean an unexpected nugget out of the chaff, and to provide frameworks to work within.

The emphasis will shift from simply "creating" content to presenting a context for it; a point of view about it--just as one of the roles of the curator is to identify, contextualize, and present a point of view about works of art.^{iv}

Equally, as we perhaps become overwhelmed by the information at our fingertips, we increasingly need the latter of the two differentiators that I suggested earlier; Social Networks. We become the curators for those around us?

Just as Google revolutionized Web search by exploiting the link structure of the Web, produced by independent activities of many Web authors, to evaluate the contents of information, the social media sites such as Flickr show the possibilities of harvesting independent activities of interconnected users to personalize information evaluation. As social networks grows, it will be impossible for users to keep track of their contacts through the kinds of simple interfaces now offered. Better interfaces, for instance, ones that create personal Explore pages by finding "interesting" images from among those produced by the user's contacts, are a feasible solution to information overload.^v

ⁱ http://leonardo.info/reviews/sept2006/curating_zilberg.html

Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems by Joasia Krysa, Editor_Autonomedia (Databrowser 03), np, 2006_288 pp. Paper, £15.00_ISBN: 1-57027-173-9.
Reviewed by Jonathan Zilberg_Independent Scholar

ⁱⁱ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html>

Time's Person of the Year: You
LEV GROSSMAN, Wednesday, Dec. 13, 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ **The Next Big Thing**
Trash Magazine 2003

^{iv} http://www.archimuse.com/mw98/papers/dietz/dietz_curatingtheweb.html

Curating (on) the Web
[Steve Dietz](#), Director of New Media Initiatives, Walker Art Center

^v <http://arxiv.org/abs/cs.HC/0612047>

Social Browsing on Flickr
Lerman, Kristina and Jones, Laurie
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