

Cut Through the Clutter: Content Curation, Associations' Secret Weapon Against Information Overload

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Information in Crisis

"[I]n an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it."

H.A. Simon¹


Does this topic seem familiar?

That may be because the first Spark whitepaper, *Attention Doesn't Scale*, published in 2012, offered content curation as a solution to the emerging problem of information overload.

Why address it again?

In the intervening eight years, the problem has only gotten more serious. The volume of information coming at your members and other audiences has only increased as the information cycle has sped up. They are inundated with waves of propaganda, generated by bad actors and disguised as fact. The role of traditional information gatekeepers has been severely devalued. People's ability to discern fact from opinion, truth from lies, is declining. They are overwhelmed with information, much of it false or untrustworthy, and are increasingly unable to discern what is reliable and what is not.

In short, society is at an information crisis point.

However, your authors believe that associations can help, and content curation is the way. 

1. "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," in M. Greenberger (Ed.), *Computers, communications, and the public interest*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.



The Scope of the Problem

“The total amount of information created on the world’s electronic devices is expected to surpass the zettabyte mark this year...”

Ann Bair, Boston Globe²

Increasing Volume of Information

What’s a zettabyte? That’s ten to the 21st power. Or, in more practical terms, that’s the amount of data contained in 250 *billion* DVDs.³

And that Boston *Globe* quote is ten years old.

How much worse has it gotten?

In 2019, *every* day:

- 500 million tweets were sent.
- 294 billion emails were sent.
- 4 petabytes of data were created on Facebook.
- 4 terabytes of data were created from each connected car.
- 65 billion messages were sent on WhatsApp.
- 5 billion searches were made.⁴

What does that mean?

“A single person watching YouTube videos for eight hours a day with no breaks or days off would need more than 16 years to watch all the content posted by just the most popular channels on the platform during a single week.”⁵

Declining Trust in Gatekeepers

Obviously, your members don’t have to deal with all that data every day. Which is a good thing, because Twitter users alone send 6,000 tweets *per second*, and we don’t know anyone who can read that quickly.⁶ But they still have to deal with a lot: Print newspapers. Magazines and journals. Radio. TV. Streaming video. Podcasts. Streaming audio. News apps and sites. Email. Social media.

In the meantime, people have dramatically lost trust in the traditional gatekeepers of information—the media, the government, institutions in general. Only 17% of Americans trust the government to do the right thing⁷ and only 41% trust the media.⁸

This allows propaganda (the more accurate term for the ubiquitous “fake news”) to spread “like wildfire” on social media, Facebook in particular. Three network theorists recently released a study⁹ looking at how propaganda spreads through networked communities.

2. http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/11/28/information_overload_the_early_years/?page=full

3. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/blog/2011/jun/29/zettabyte-data-internet-cisco>

4. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/how-much-data-is-generated-each-day-cf4bddf29f/>

5. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/07/25/a-week-in-the-life-of-popular-youtube-channels/>

6. <https://www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics/>

7. <https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>

8. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/267047/americans-trust-mass-media-edges-down.aspx>

9. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319210331_Fake_News_in_Social_Networks/link/5bb33d3da6fdccd3cb817e3c/download

“[The study] found that the most important catalyst of fake news was the precision with which the purveyor targeted an audience—a task that can easily be accomplished using the data that tech companies routinely gather and sell to advertisers. . . . False stories spread farther when they were initially aimed at poorly informed people who had a hard time telling if a claim was true or false. . . . Hence, we’ve unwittingly engineered a social media environment that is inherently prone to fake news epidemics. . . . [I]n the wrong hands, the technology becomes a means for the precision seeding of propaganda.”¹⁰

Declining Ability to Assess Information

Compounding the problem, people’s ability to assess the quality and veracity of information is also declining.

Researchers at Stanford University recently invested a year surveying students across 12 states, giving them 56 individual tasks to perform online and collecting more than 7,800 responses. These students came from both under-resourced and privileged areas and were in both primary and secondary school and college or university.

The results?


“Overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak. [W]e sought to establish a reasonable bar, a level of performance we hoped was within reach of most middle school, high school, and college students. . . . But in every case and at every level, we were taken aback by students’ lack of preparation.”¹¹

Lest you think this is only a student problem, that, as people learn and gain life experience, they become more discerning about information, those same researchers later studied Stanford undergraduates, Stanford doctors of history, and professional fact-checkers.

The results were also not good.

“Historians and students often fell victim to easily manipulated features of websites, such as official-looking logos and domain names.”¹²

Indeed, a recent Pew study looking at Americans’ ability to distinguish between opinion statements and factual reporting (that is, statements, whether true or false, that can be objectively proven or disproven), found that “a majority of Americans correctly identified at least three of the five statements in each set.” You might think that sounds pretty good, but the report goes on to reveal: “This result is only a little better than random guesses.” Concerningly, “roughly a quarter got most or all wrong.”¹³

Associations are obviously not going to be able to end the plague of Russian bot farms or fix Facebook’s many deficiencies, and you can’t solve information overload across all aspects of your members’ lives. But associations do have a critical role to play in helping members identify valid information sources, select relevant data, place it in context, and use it to make sense of their professional worlds. The problem identified in the original whitepaper in 2012 remains the same: We’ve moved from a world of information scarcity, when many associations were founded, to one of information overload, to which associations often contribute. The question association executives face likewise remains the same: How do you make your members’ professional lives better and easier? 

10. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-fake-news-google-facebook-0904-story.html>

11. Wineburg, Sam and McGrew, Sarah and Breakstone, Joel and Ortega, Teresa. (2016). Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning. Stanford Digital Repository. Available at: <http://purl.stanford.edu/fv751yt5934>

12. Wineburg, Sam and McGrew, Sarah, Lateral Reading: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information (October 6, 2017). Stanford History Education Group Working Paper No. 2017-A1. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3048994>

13. <https://www.journalism.org/2018/06/18/distinguishing-between-factual-and-opinion-statements-in-the-news/>

What is Content Curation?

“I am responsible for growing and interpreting the collection in order to educate, entertain, and intrigue our visitors.”

Joan R. Kropf, deputy director, Dalí Museum¹⁴

Content curation builds on the concept of museum curation, which refers to the art of selecting pieces from a museum’s extensive collection of artifacts so that a given exhibit can tell exactly the right story. The selection of the artifacts shapes the audience’s experience nearly as much as the artifacts themselves, turning shelves of dusty antiques into a compelling narrative.

Museum curators curate artifacts. Associations curate information. Every conference is a curated set of presentations, exhibits, and talks; every magazine is a curated set of interviews, trend-spotting, and other types of articles; and the association’s programs themselves are a carefully curated set of offerings that ensures the association’s value proposition by helping members achieve their most important goals and solve their most pressing problems.

As articulated in *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, a report issued by the ASAE Foundation in 2019, associations “use content as a primary mechanism for providing value to members.”¹⁵ Associations are in the content business.

Whether the focus is on content about or from an association’s programs, products, and services or content related to its industry or profession, curation plays a critical role in helping organizations carry out their content strategies. (For more on the Foundation report, see Summary: *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, pp. 17-18.)

Associations use the phrase “content curation” in three ways:

- **Sharing industry news.** This news-sharing usually consists of headlines and/or short summaries, with links to original sources so members can delve more deeply into topics that interest them.
- **Distilling industry trends.** Distillation is more than merely sharing specific news articles as they are published. It describes gathering the right information and providing the context necessary to tell a story about a topic or trend affecting the profession or industry the association serves.
- **Sharing original information from the association.** Associations do this as a matter of course, through all their various platforms, but curating your association’s content involves tailoring it to a specific audience, surfacing it at a time of particular need or relevance, centering it around a particular topic, personalizing it to an individual’s expressed preferences, or delivering it based on that person’s observed past behavior.

How Curation Happens

Technology

Artificial intelligence (AI) technology and tools are making an enormous difference in workload and in the quality of content offerings. Before AI reached its current level of sophistication, associations frequently used RSS feeds to deliver a stream of content, but it wasn’t actually curated. AI allows associations to automate the process of providing different content to members and other audiences based on things like their demographics, their expressed preferences and interests, and their observed behavior.

14. <https://www.tampabay.com/things-to-do/visualarts/the-art-of-curation-museum-curators-talk-about-what-they-do/2242847/>

15. *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, pg. 3

Process

Association staff can't always know everything about everything, and they can't always catch every important idea, topic, or trend. Fortunately, associations have access to a wealth of subject-matter experts among their volunteers, members, customers, and industry partners and corporate supporters. These SMEs often have insight into specific trends and topics staff may lack, especially topics and trends that may just be emerging.

People

Quality content curation requires knowledgeable, well-trained staff. Whether it's summarizing industry news articles, adding the commentary to trend articles that provides critical context, or selecting information about the appropriate association offerings for a given audience segment, your publications and/or communications staff has an important curatorial role to fulfill as part of their larger slate of responsibilities.

Ideally, your curation efforts will include all three: the machine curation of AI-enabled technology, the wisdom of crowds among your members and other key stakeholder groups, and the expert intervention of your staff members.

All this curated information can then be packaged in a variety of ways:

- Lists, a form of curation called “aggregation.”
- Visuals, such as charts, graphs, or infographics.
- News clips, headlines accompanied by short summaries and generally linking to longer, more detailed pieces.
- Timelines, a form of curation called “chronology,” for events that take place in some sort of succession.
- Trend-spotting pieces, generally short articles that identify the trend and explain why it matters now for your association's particular industry or profession.

And it can be shared on a variety of platforms:

- Websites, where content curation is essential to presenting information topically, by combining technology—taxonomy-driven content management systems, for example—and human insight.
- E-newsletters, where AI-powered platforms allow associations to deliver customized content to each subscriber.
- Social media, where associations both curate what they wish to share on their own platforms (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest) and use those same platforms to help identify new topics and trends.
- Print, including newsletters, magazines, journals, books and e-books, industry reports and studies, and standards and guidelines.
- Presentations, including conferences and symposia, webinars, and hybrid and fully virtual events.

The Promise of Curation

Twenty years ago, *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business As Usual*¹⁶ posited that the web's real power was in changing the ways people interact with organizations. The book's prescient premise was that, at their heart, organizations are human, and thus people expect organizations to behave in human ways, talk in authentic, human terms, and provide real, human value. (For more on this, see also Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant's 2011 book *Humanize: How People-Centric Organizations Succeed in a Social World.*)

Thanks to the internet, information is readily available. In fact, one could argue it is *too* readily available. Because of that, associations can no longer provide value by delivering the same information members could get from a quick Google search.

16. <https://www.cluetrain.com>

Today's information problem isn't just about too much information. It's really about too much *raw* information. Associations have the opportunity to deliver more than what Google can—to locate, distill, and analyze the information members and other audiences most need to know, right now, and to place it in context that makes it meaningful to them in ways that help them make sense of their world and operating environment.

The good news is that associations already know how to do this. When an individual member reaches out directly to her association, staff members go out of their way to help her solve her problem, point her to the right resources, and provide the critical context that she needs.

Effective content curation scales up that one-to-one model, showing a new way for associations to serve their members, helping them achieve their most important goals and solve their most pressing problems. ✨

What Should Associations Do?

“In a knowledge-rich world, progress does not lie in the direction of reading and writing information faster or storing more of it. Progress lies in the direction of extracting and exploiting the patterns of the world so that far less information needs to be read, written, or stored. Progress depends on our ability to devise better and more powerful thinking programs for man [sic] and machine.”

H.A. Simon¹⁷

Stop trying to be Google.

Aggregating information is a form of curation, to be sure, but it is the least useful form. As the interview with Carrie Hane and Dina Lewis (page 14) highlighted, it is unfortunately often the starting and end point of association “curation” efforts.

Partnering with one of the “smart” newsletter firms (Multiview, Naylor, rasa.io, SmartBrief, Smart Letter) that uses AI to disseminate personalized—or at least semi-personalized—information to your members and other audiences is a good starting place. Those are nice-to-have services for your community that can also generate non-dues revenue.

But the core function of associations is to help the professions or industries you serve solve problems and achieve goals they can’t on their own. That’s why people associate in the first place—they’re trying to accomplish something they can’t accomplish by themselves.

Your association’s community is experiencing information overload in a time when it’s become increasingly difficult to assess the quality of that information due to the proliferation of sources and to the declining trust people have in traditional gatekeepers of information.

Piling on links to a bunch of stuff absent context isn’t going to help solve that problem. If your association really wants to get to the root of this for the people you serve,

you are going to have to move beyond mere aggregation and use multiple methods to achieve distillation, or museum-style curation.

Recognize that there are many sources of information out there that are at least as good—if not better than—what your association is providing.

That’s hard for associations to accept. Associations have a long history of being a, if not the, major source of information for the professions and industries they serve. Indeed, according to the 2019 Community Brands *Member Engagement and Loyalty Study*, industry information is still one of the top benefits members identify and is a key driver of retention (although, interestingly, association professionals think targeted content is far more important than members do).¹⁸ (association professionals think targeted content is far more important than members do, as you can see on the full chart of benefits on the following page).

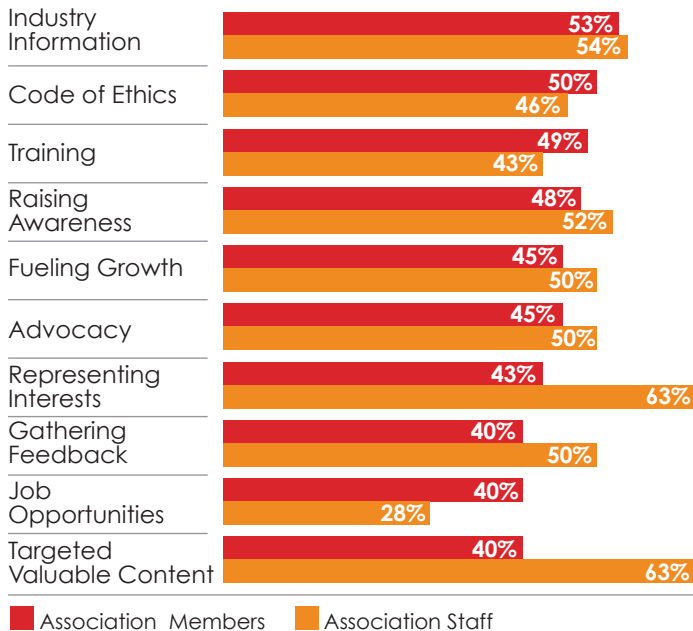
However, with the advent of the open-access movement in scholarly journals, platforms like Google Scholar and Research Gate, limited metering and pay-for-only-the-articles-you-want sites like *Harvard Business Review* and *Sloan Management Review*, and the ease with which industry influencers can create personal platforms on sites like Medium and Twitter, your members have ready access to expert information. In fact, perhaps too ready.

17. “Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World,” in M. Greenberger (Ed.), *Computers, communications, and the public interest*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.

18. 2019 Community Brands *Member Engagement and Loyalty Study*, p. 12

Top 10 Member Benefits

2019 Community Brands Member Engagement and Loyalty Study



What that means in a practical sense is that, when it's time for your annual magazine/newsletter/blog/podcast focus on volunteer leadership, rather than writing another series of original articles on the topic, thus contributing to your members' problems with information overload, seek out the five best pieces of information available on volunteer leadership in the past year from recognized experts, present them, and provide context. Explain to your members why these are the best five pieces of content in the past year, why these particular pieces matter to them, how the pieces specifically impact and complement your association's particular volunteer structure and industry trends, why those particular individuals should care, and how they can use the information contained to become better volunteer leaders in your community.

Curate and repurpose your own content.

This may seem to contradict the previous point, but it's actually complementary. Remember, your audiences are looking to you for information about the profession or industry your association serves, and your association likely generates a lot of it, out of many different departments. That's actually the problem: Silos. We guarantee that your association is generating more content than you know, sending it out to various segments of your community in ways that may not be particularly well-coordinated, and likely not re-using it effectively.

Repurposing your own content is all about matching the type or format of the content to the appropriate delivery mechanism (e.g., creating an infographic from the data shared in a research report, turning excerpts from a conference presentation into an e-book). Digital agency Mighty Citizen, borrowing from content "guru" Gary Vaynerchuk, recommends formalizing a tiered approach, where one piece of long-form content provides fodder for presenting pieces of that content in various shorter-form versions and distributing those shorter pieces through a variety of channels.¹⁹

Be member-centric rather than association-centric.

This concept is discussed at length in the Spark/The Demand Networks monograph *Leading Engagement from the Outside-In*, but the key point is: Seek to view the world from your members' perspective and focus on their most important goals and their most pressing problems, not on the association's own internal goals. Or, as Distilled Logic's Dina Lewis put it: "Associations should start with finding out what members need, then think about how to deliver and measure success."

19. <https://www.mightycitizen.com/insights/articles/how-to-make-your-content-work-harder-for-you>

Hire and train for new skills.

The original 2012 *Attention Doesn't Scale* whitepaper made this point as well, referencing the Institute for the Future's *Future Work Skills 2020* report.

It now is 2020, and IFTF has updated that report, grouping its previously identified 21st century work skills in four main areas:

- Personal skills: resilience.
- People skills: cross-cultural competency, social intelligence, virtual collaboration.
- Applied knowledge: novel and adaptive thinking, cognitive load management, sense-making.
- Workplace skills: new media literacy, design mindset, transdisciplinarity, computational thinking.²⁰

As you begin to transition your content staff from writing and editing to curating, context-providing, and sense-making, these are the types of knowledge, skills, and abilities you will need to nurture in them. To quote the IFTF report:

“As smart machines are used for more routine manufacturing and service jobs, there will be an increasing demand for the kinds of skills that machines do not perform well. These are higher-level cognitive skills that cannot be engineered into mechanical systems. We call these ‘sense-making skills’ or skills that help us to create unique insights that are critical to decision-making. ... While data-mining and other tools can be effective at finding ... connections, they cannot effectively place these findings in context. It takes a human being to assemble data and correlations and then meaningfully translate them into rich stories that garner attention.”²¹

Engage your volunteers in new ways.

While the Baby Boom generation still provides numerically the most volunteers, GenXers volunteer at the highest rates (36%, versus 31% for Boomers and 28% for Millennials)²² and Millennials will be overtaking both groups soon.

As discussed in the Spark/Mariner Management monograph *The Mission Driven Volunteer*, due to both generational and life-stage issues, those Xers (and the upcoming Millennial and GenY generations) are interested in different kinds of volunteer opportunities than previous generations. Due to life-stage issues, sandwich generation GenXers, who are taking care of both school-age children and aging parents, need ad hoc, episodic, micro, and virtual volunteering opportunities. Meanwhile, Millennials and members of GenY are looking to hone specific, marketable skills in their volunteering.²³

Helping identify topics and trends is a quick volunteer activity your GenX members can squeeze in among their other responsibilities. Helping your staff create the “sense-making” stories that show why particular content matters is a meaningful volunteer activity your Millennial and GenY members can use to build their own resumes and professional reputations.

20. <http://www.iff.org/futureskills/>

21. *Future Skills Update + Literature Review*, pg. 21

22. <https://www.nationalservice.gov/serve/via/demographics>

23. *The Mission Driven Volunteer*, pg. 3

What Stands in Associations' Way?

Per *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, common challenges that impede creating an effective content strategy include:

- Difficulty setting priorities (when everything is top priority, you have no priorities), particularly setting priorities based on audience (rather than association) needs.

- Silos and territoriality.
- Not using data effectively to drive decisions (the data the association needs may not exist, or, if it does, the association is either not collecting it or not using it).
- Lack of consistency.
- Lack of leadership support for creating and following an overarching strategy that everyone understands and supports.²⁴ 🌟

Association Content Curation Maturity Model

7 Add Analysis	help your members make sense of their world, by helping them understand why what you've selected for them matters and how it's going to impact them	
6 Add Personality	develop an organizational voice and perspective	
5 Provide Context	group industry news and association resources topically	
4 Leverage artificial intelligence	deliver smart content based on both members' self-reporting and on observing their behavior and interaction with content	
3 Self-curation	allow members to select what information they'll receive based on their expressed interests	
2 Share quality information	choose from among all available pieces of content through a formal editorial process	
1 Share quantity information	provide industry news and association resources gleaned from news feeds or aggregated by a third-party vendor	

24. *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, pp. 8-9

CASE STUDY

The Institute of Food Technologists: Content Curation is a Journey

“I look at the organization holistically to try and tell our story.”

Rae Ulrich, senior director of integrated marketing and brand strategy

In 2017, the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT), a Chicago-based association for food scientists with about 75 staff members, realized they needed to make a major change to the way they collect, package, and share information online.

At the time, IFT’s website contained topic-focused areas where its Science & Policy staff aggregated and shared content from external sources. Rae Ulrich, senior director of integrated marketing and brand strategy, was charged with changing that. Her challenge? To present IFT’s content in more compelling ways and then help IFT’s members and extended community find and use content they need and can’t get anywhere else.

IFT is transitioning from simply gathering and sharing content to analyzing it and placing it in context for members. Currently, they publish a mix of content: original research, courses, magazine articles, and videos, as well as information from relevant government agencies.

As an example, Farida Mohamedshah, MS, CNS, looks at the intersection of nutrition, food science, and government policy in her role as IFT’s director of nutrition science, food laws, and regulation. She and her colleagues work on high-profile issues like U.S. dietary guidelines, nutrition facts labels on food, food safety regulations, and global food traceability, not only providing critical information but also helping IFT members make sense of it. “When I create a toolkit on the nutrition facts label, for instance, I explain how our members can educate others on choosing foods that are healthy,” Mohamedshah explained.

“My team and I pull together all of the association’s content to present it, share it, and market it effectively,” Ulrich said. “We use an overarching message matrix, a content calendar, to curate what we market, communicate, and promote on all of our different channels.

“A group of staff members reviews the messaging matrix every month to ensure alignment between the key themes and topics we’ve identified and the content we’re providing. In addition to the toolkits, white papers, and commentary from Farida’s team, we create things like podcasts that also line up with those themes. We’re not highlighting just any content; we focus on the topics that are most important to our members,” said Ulrich.

How do they know what those topics are?

“We work with a specific group of food science communicators on an ongoing basis, who have the pulse on hot and important topics, and we survey our members every year,” said Ulrich. “We also look at search keywords from our website and good adwords, as well as social media engagement, to gain insight into what topics are trending.”

Mohamedshah added, “In addition to what we hear from our communicators and members, internally, we identify key topics that we think are important for our members.”

Next up on Ulrich’s content to-do list? Developing a centralized taxonomy to power the entire IFT website and private online community and using AI to help determine what topics to address, based on each user’s interests. Ulrich’s team also plans to build newsletters that will use AI to generate content based on each user’s interests. “And then we’ll be using that data to help us identify what content we need to create.”

About IFT

Since 1939, the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) has been a forum for passionate science of food professionals and technologists to collaborate, learn, and contribute all with the goal of inspiring and transforming collective scientific knowledge into innovative solutions for the benefit of all people around the world. As a scientific community grounded in purpose, IFT feeds the minds that feed the world. 

Achieving “Curation Greatness”

“Rather than being only writers or even editors, the communications department has to become the organization’s team of managing editors—setting the schedules, developing and enforcing style, making sure that the right people are disseminating and receiving the right information. ... They need to be editors-in-chief, planning, assigning, and overseeing rather than doing.”

Hilary Marsh, chief strategist, Content Company²⁵

The world in which associations communicate with their members and other audiences has changed dramatically, and associations need to change internal information management processes and procedures accordingly.

Your association’s goal should be something Robin Good—a digital publisher who provides expert curation on a large number of topics, including content curation itself—terms “curation greatness,” providing value to your audiences by helping them make sense of information and their environment.

What does a great curator do?

- **Optimizes** and **Edits** titles to make sure the intent and purpose of the content is clear.
- **Formats** the content to be easily read and assimilated.
- **Selects** images that enhance the message and add to the impact.
- **Excerpts** the actual original text to help readers quickly understand importance.
- **Writes** original, supplementary content as necessary to provide context.
- **Classifies** categories effectively so readers can place content within their mental maps.
- **Links** to resources for additional information.
- **Personalizes** per channel and audience.
- **Vets** original sources for integrity and quality.

- **Credits** original sources appropriately.
- **Filters** the majority of incoming content out.
- **Taps** skilled collaborators to help.
- **Suggests** sources to those collaborators (as a way of “paying it forward”).
- **Searches** for more context to provide depth.
- **Scouts** quality, verified sources.
- **Hacks Filters** and **Searches** to find those sources.
- **Is Transparent** about criteria by which content is selected or excluded.
- **Recommends** other quality curators (again, as a way of “paying it forward”).
- **Crowdsources** from readers, and credits them for their contributions.²⁶

Your members and other audiences can—indeed, want to—help you achieve “curation greatness.” Many of these tasks lend themselves to ad hoc, episodic, micro, and virtual contributions. Crediting members’ assistance in doing things like vetting, classifying, excerpting, and original writing helps them develop and demonstrate critical professional skills. Remember that, per ASAE’s *The Decision to Join* study, volunteers are more likely than members at large to have a positive Net Promoter Score for your association, which increases both their likelihood of being advocates for membership and of renewing membership themselves.²⁷

25. <https://contentcompany.biz/blog/to-make-your-website-work-transform-your-communicators-from-writers-to-editors/>

26. <https://www.masternewmedia.org/what-makes-a-great-curator-great/>

27. *The Decision to Join*, pp. 26-27

The alternative, according to Robin Good, is “curators” who merely republish, acting as indiscriminate aggregators, without editing or filtering, providing no unique voice or viewpoint, no context or meaning, and thus add no value and merely compound their audiences’ struggles with information overload.

Association members and other audiences desperately need help managing the tsunami of information and misinformation coming at them, particularly since no one has yet found that elusive 25th daily hour we’ve all been seeking for years, and right now associations are failing them.

Association executives must become the type of visionary, inspiring, data-driven leaders necessary to effect this change in how associations operate. Associations have to give up an arrogant and outdated insistence on being the sole,

best source of information for the communities they serve. Association executives have to recruit and train staff teams for 21st century skills. Associations have to invite members and other audiences in, enabling them to contribute to the work of organizations in meaningful ways.

This shift will allow associations to move from being one more item on members’ to-do lists, potentially an item with a fairly low level of priority, to being a vital partner in their personal and professional success, a trusted source that makes their lives easier, helping direct their limited attention to what really matters, and providing the context necessary to help them make sense of their increasingly complex and challenging professional worlds.

Which would your association rather be? 

Bonus Content

Interview with Carrie Hane and Dina Lewis, CAE The Role of Curation in Content Strategy

During the process of researching this whitepaper, we had the opportunity to interview Carrie Hane (founder and principal strategist, Tanzen) and Dina Lewis, CAE (founder, Distilled Logic), who, with Hilary, co-authored *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, released by the ASAE Foundation in 2019. For more information on the Foundation report, see pp. 17-18.

You've just published a research report for the ASAE Foundation on content strategy. Obviously, curation is only one piece of an association's overall content strategy. What role do you think it plays?

Hane: First of all, I think we're misusing the word "curation." What we often call curation is actually aggregation. While creating a clearinghouse of information might have made sense 20 years ago, now we have Google. It's the human element that creates value, making sure that relevant, accurate, credible content gets to the people who need it.

Lewis: The technology has gotten ahead of the human element. Content marketers have been successful at selling AI newsletters. If you set your content up properly, with effective tagging and metadata, the algorithms can easily create a "personalized, curated" newsletter, but that's starting from what we can deliver, not with what people need. Associations should start with finding out what members need, then think about how to deliver and measure success, not just with opens and clicks. Measure how members are consuming and applying the content you're providing.

What trends are you noticing with regard to curation?

Lewis: Organizations are increasingly focusing on content that tells a story. My favorite (non-association) example is *The New York Times* Cooking daily newsletter.²⁸ My question is: Why aren't more associations picking up on storytelling, sharing industry perspectives through member stories, and using different forms of media (podcasts, video) effectively?

Hane: It's important to tell people why they should care, then provide the links. Good examples include *TheSkimm*²⁹ and *Brain Pickings*.³⁰ *Brain Pickings* is particularly interesting. It comes out twice a week and consists of long-form essays with links to additional resources about the topic. When we think of curated information, we tend to think it has to be short, and it doesn't—it just has to matter.

What do you see as the key to successful, effective curation?

Hane: When you think of curation, what's the first thing that comes to mind? Museums. Museum curators collect many more artifacts than they use, and, from that whole warehouse of items, they make choices about what items to include that will tell a coherent story and create greater understanding.

Lewis: Providing context is key. That's what museum exhibits do, and that's what is far too often missing from the process of aggregation we mistakenly call "curation."

28. <https://www.nytimes.com/newsletters/cooking>

29. <https://www.theskimm.com>

30. <https://www.brainpickings.org>

Hane and Lewis Interview Cont'd

What advice would you have for associations that, referring back to the ASAE Foundation study, are trying to move from the “Beginner” stage to “Intermediate,” or “Intermediate” to “Advanced”?

Hane: Begin at the beginning. Stop what you're doing and figure out what you should be doing. Rethink, rather than just redesign: “If we didn't already have a 150-year-old association and a 20-year-old website, what would we create?”

Lewis: Think carefully about accessibility of content. Where and when are your audiences accessing your content? Thinking through, from the member perspective, how they are using your content will help you present it in a way that it can be consumed when and where your audiences need it.

Hane: Get out of the box of your internal departmental structure and think more broadly about other applications of your content. If only one-third of the proposals for your annual meeting are accepted every year, how can you disseminate the other content that was proposed, outside the constraint of a three-day, in-person meeting?

Lewis: Take bite-sized pieces of professional development course content and present them to people who aren't ready to take that course yet. This is a low-risk, low-effort way to introduce your association's offerings to new audiences who might then go on to become loyal customers or members later. 

Interview with Bryan Kelly Using Artificial Intelligence to Power Curation

Bryan Kelly (publisher-in-chief, *Smart Letter*) had an “aha” moment about the power of and need for curation back in 2012 when he spoke with Elizabeth as part of her research for *Attention Doesn't Scale*, the very first Spark whitepaper, which was also on content curation. That conversation led him to identify a challenge: “How do we take all this content being thrown at all of us, being overwhelmed with content, and help members figure out how to not get distracted by the noise and stay on top of what's relevant? I could imagine a member saying, ‘I just got a dozen emails. I'm sure something here is important to pay attention to, but I'm overwhelmed,’” said Kelly in a recent interview.


From his then-post as vice-president of marketing at Aptify, an association management software provider, he spoke with Aptify CEO Amith Nagarajan, who was then leading the company's innovation lab. The team was building the technology that initially became an online community that would “pull content together and sift and sort based on each individual's stated preferences, the data about them in an association membership database, and AI-tracked behavioral data,” Kelly said. “It was initially envisioned as a Facebook-style newsfeed in descending chronological order, with important content bubbling up. We cast it as a community because at the time many associations were predominantly using listservs or other community solutions as a way for members to get content, conversation, and networking at the same time.”

That technology spun off into a separate business in 2015 called *rasa.io*, and a year after the new company launched, Kelly and the *rasa.io* team had another insight: They realized associations' content overload problem wasn't in their private online communities, but rather in their e-newsletters. In response, they shifted *rasa.io*'s focus, offering associations the ability to create custom, AI-driven newsletters for their members. Associations could choose from a pre-selected set of content sources, monitor daily, and gradually narrow down to the top sources and topics to deliver the most relevant stories for each person based on their stated preferences and demonstrated behavior.

In early 2019, Kelly and Nagarajan formed yet another company, *Smart Letter*, that uses the *rasa.io* platform to build newsletters for specific audiences. “Rather than convincing a legal association to adopt *rasa.io*, we instead created a newsletter for lawyers. Of course, associations can also use *rasa.io* on their own to streamline their content curation and publishing process.”

Kelly emphasized the importance of combining technology and human expertise to achieve the best results. “Most of *rasa.io*'s clients have a human team provide a creative, personal touch by choosing the content they want to highlight, and then they let the AI pull the rest of the content,” Kelly says. “They use technology to take over the manual aspects of gathering, sifting, and sorting content, and then the people can focus on summaries and highlights, applying the right editorial voice, and making sure that the content inspires members to open and click on it.”

The approach has proved to be successful. “When associations start providing personalized, relevant content, we're seeing open rates increase from around 10% to, typically, up to 40%. Associations are having better success getting information out that members need to know, and they are creating more enriching connections with members,” said Kelly.

Kelly's advice to associations: “If you're spending a lot of time pulling content for a daily newsletter, you get focused on ‘I just have to get this out.’ Let the AI tools manage the mechanical part of the process and focus your energy and resources on why this piece of content is important. With so much content out there now, sifting and filtering it can be a full-time job. If you focus all your energy and resources on that, there's no time left for commentary or critique or to highlight what's important. Let the technology do what it does best and enable your editorial or content team and your writers to do what they do best.” 

SUMMARY: Association Content Strategies for a Changing World

In 2019, the ASAE Foundation published *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, a report detailing the results of the first major study of content strategy adoption and maturity in associations. The study set out to answer the question: How are associations managing the challenges and changes in how they create, facilitate, curate, and disseminate knowledge and learning through content?³¹

For this study, content strategy was defined as:

[t]he planning and judgment for the creation, publication, dissemination, and governance of useful, usable, effective content across departments and functional areas.³²

Content strategy helps an organization prioritize and plan what types of content to produce and how to deliver them for the best value. And curation is definitely part of the mix, both in what associations produce and how they deliver the content.

What does a holistic association content strategy look like?

- Each piece of content it produces has an explicit, measurable goal tied to a specific outcome of the program that the content is about and a clearly articulated audience.
- Content is created in a way—terminology, readability level, format, length, timing, etc.—that resonates with the audience.
- The people with expertise in creating, publishing, and promoting content work in partnership with subject-matter experts managing the organization's programs to ensure that the content about and from those programs achieves its goals.
- The organization evaluates content to determine whether the content meets its goals, and that information drives decisions about what to do more of, do less of, or do differently.

- Subject-matter experts work in partnership with each other to determine when to collaborate, when to cross-link, and when to reuse content that another department has created.³³

Getting to a place where all these conditions can happen requires a collaborative rather than competitive or conflicting culture. It requires trust and shared responsibilities among program-focused departments and between subject-matter experts and content experts. And it requires that content-related responsibilities become part of the job descriptions of each person who plays any part in the organization's content.

The research team—Carrie Hane, Dina Lewis, and Hilary Marsh—identified 17 tactics that comprise content strategy and then conducted a series of surveys and in-depth interviews to learn about how associations use the 17 tactics and how those activities were tied to the subjects' culture and effectiveness.

The associations that participated in the study ranked the 17 tactics on commonality of use, value, and ease of use. There was only a 10% difference in value from the most valued tactic (conducting regular content audits) to the least valued tactic (creating and using audience personas). However, there was a significant difference in ease of use, and, unsurprisingly, the easiest tactics to use are also the most commonly used tactics. In order:

1. Monitor digital analytics
2. Audience surveys
3. Planning calendars (editorial calendars)
4. Stakeholder interviews
5. Structured content
6. Content governance
7. Editorial style guide
8. Job descriptions
9. Taxonomies
10. Personas

31. *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, pg. 3

32. *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, pg. 4

33. *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, pg. 5

Content Strategies Cont'd

The other seven tactics were all used by less than 50% of respondents.

The tactics respondents most want to be using are data-driven decision-making, personas, and planning calendars. The reason those first two don't top the list of what associations are actually using is because of the difficulty involved.

The research team then used those 17 tactics to construct a three-level maturity model: Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced. Associations that used six or fewer of the tactics rated as "Beginning." Associations that used seven to thirteen of the tactics rated as "Intermediate." Associations that used 14 or more of the tactics rated as "Advanced."

- Those at the beginning level may be trying out various approaches but may only be able to work with some of the organization's content.
- Intermediate-level associations may be able to incorporate more content and build in awareness of performance and results.
- Advanced associations are likely to plan content collaboratively and, therefore, can build in curation tactics and measures right from the start. Because they can connect content to the organization's mission and its members' needs, these organizations have a much clearer sense of which content most resonates. As a result, they can make smarter content decisions and have the buy-in to review those decisions periodically.

According to the study, 35% of participant associations are currently at the Beginning level, 55% are Intermediate, and 10% assess themselves to be at the Advanced level.

One of the key differentiators is independent actions being taken by siloed teams in different departments (e.g., web team starts using Google analytics, marketing team creates a content calendar, communications team puts together a style guide) versus organization-wide alignment, in which you create an actual strategy and cross-functional workflows to support it and make evidence-based decisions, at which point accountability and enforcement become important, as does continuing to iterate as you learn.

The report documents the following positive outcomes of effective content strategy and practices for associations:

- Content sounds like it is from the same organization, regardless of which department produces it.
- Content is published based on the topic, not the source.
- Content is promoted to and shared with only the audience(s) for which it is relevant.
- All content has a clear audience and a measurable goal.

The study confirmed that incorporating content strategy into standard operating procedures is critical to an association's success, that effective content strategy is a set of practices rather than a single action or document, and that associations at every level of content strategy maturity can use content curation as part of their overall content strategy. 🌟

“How To” Guides and Curation Tools

Sprout Social, a social media management platform, offers “five simple steps” to curation for those who are just getting started.

<https://sproutsocial.com/insights/how-to-curate-content/>

Hootsuite, another social media management platform, has created a guide that shares eight tips to doing content curation right and ten tools that can help you: five targeted specifically for beginners, three for intermediate curators, and two for advanced users.

<https://blog.hootsuite.com/beginners-guide-to-content-curation/>

Beth Kanter, the nonprofit tech, training, and capacity-building expert, has created a content curation primer, organized around her “Three S’s” of curation: Seek, Sense, and Share. It includes a chart that shows you how often you need to do each step and gives general guidelines, for planning purposes, on how much time each step should take.

<http://www.bethkanter.org/content-curation-101/>

For those who are a bit more advanced, the **Content Marketing Institute** offers a detailed plan for taking advantage of three highly effective and often overlooked curation strategies: leveraging “underground” content, framing curated content, and impressing the original creators.

<https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/04/content-curation-strategies/>

If you’re still not quite sure how and why to shift what you hire and train for, **Hilary** offers advice on her company’s blog.

<https://contentcompany.biz/blog/to-make-your-website-work-transform-your-communicators-from-writers-to-editors/>

Anders Pink, another curation platform, has curated the top tips from 23 different curation experts (including several that are featured elsewhere in this monograph) that can help you take your curation efforts to a 201 level.

<https://blog.anderspink.com/2016/08/improve-your-content-curation-23-tips-from-the-experts/>

Need more ideas for tools?

Hubspot, the inbound marketing firm, reviews 13 tools every content curator needs, explaining what they are and how to use them.

<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/content-curation-tools>

Curata, the content strategy firm, maintains the “ultimate list” of curation tools (warning: there are LOT of them).

<http://www.curata.com/blog/content-curation-tools-the-ultimate-list/>

Questions for Reflection

- What are the professional areas in which your members and other audiences are experiencing particular information overload stress? How could your association use curation skills to help ameliorate that stress?
- Does your association have a formal content strategy? If not, how can you begin creating one?
- Has your association assessed your level of content maturity? What tactics might you want to add to start moving to the next level?
- How can you incorporate a curation mindset into your new or existing content strategy?
- What is your association doing to track emerging trends and issues in your industry or profession?
- What are the top five or ten respected sources of information in your industry or profession your association should be actively tracking?
- How can your association build relationships with influencers in your industry or profession to cross-promote and share important information?
- Who on your staff is in charge of curating your association's information?
- How can you build a curation structure that takes advantage of the three modes of curation: machine/artificial intelligence, crowdsourcing, and expert curation?
- What method(s) of delivery would your members and other audiences find most useful for the content you've curated for them?
- How are you shifting what your association hires and trains for from 20th century skills to 21st century skills, i.e., resilience, cross-cultural competency, social intelligence, virtual collaboration, sense-making, new media literacy, etc.?
- How can you engage your members and other audiences in helping your association change the way you relate to and relay information?

Additional Resources

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About Hilary Marsh

Hilary Marsh is president and chief strategist of Content Company (<https://contentcompany.biz>), a content and digital strategy consultancy. She helps associations get better results from their content by improving their practices for content creation, governance, management, and promotions. Content Company's association clients include the American Bar Association, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, American Water Works Association, Endocrine Society, National Association of Convenience Stores, Institute of Food Technologists, and Florida Realtors.

As managing director of REALTOR.org from 2005 to 2011, Hilary oversaw the National Association of

Realtors' member website and created the association's groundbreaking social media strategy.

Hilary has been a leading content strategy practitioner, mentor, and professor since 1999. She developed and taught the first graduate-level content strategy courses for Kent State University. She has been published, quoted, and cited in major industry publications including *Content Strategy for the Web*, *Content Strategy at Work*, and reports from Prophet/Altimeter. She is a co-author of *Association Content Strategies for a Changing World*, a report issued by the ASAE Foundation in 2019.

About Elizabeth Weaver Engel

Elizabeth Weaver Engel, M.A., CAE, chief strategist at Spark Consulting LLC, has more than 20 years of experience in association management. Although her primary focus has been in membership, marketing, and communications, her work 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 provides strategic membership and marketing advice and assistance to 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!

Elizabeth combines a focus on asking the right questions and finding and implementing creative solutions with a

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

Prior to launching Spark, Elizabeth consulted in online campaigns and marketing and 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, director of marketing and sponsorship, vice president of marketing, and acting CEO.

Elizabeth is a certified association executive (CAE) and holds a master's degree in government and foreign affairs from the University of Virginia.