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Curating and the End of the Professions

Abstract

The terms 'curate', 'curating' and 'curation' are used broadly in contemporary culture, associated with such activities as blogging and cooking, with an apparent disregard for the education and training of professional curators. This article argues, however, that ubiquitous references to curating do not simply appropriate the identity of the 'real' curator, but can be more fully understood in relation to the changing conceptions of work described by economists and legal scholars. In this light, re-articulations of curating attempt to negotiate both the declining status of the professions and the increasingly uncertain nature of employment.

Keywords

curating
professions
economic change
blogging
decline of expertise

A radio advertisement encourages listeners to visit a new restaurant, promising cheese plates that have been curated by a world-class chef. Posters for a nightclub highlight the name of a popular DJ who curates playlists sure to please audiences. The marquee sign outside of a dry-cleaning business boasts of its ability to curate your laundry. How can these diverse and in some cases rather mundane activities be considered curating? Why does the verb 'to curate' continue to be used so broadly, with apparently little regard for the skills, education and training of professional curators?

This article will answer these questions with reference to changing conceptualizations of work and employment. This larger economic framework can address both 'sides' of the issue, explaining why some people, especially museum curators, art historians and art critics, are apprehensive

about the widespread use of the term 'curating', while others, including chefs, DJs and dry-cleaners, embrace the word without reservation. Both groups clearly have different understandings of what curating entails, but the debate cannot simply be characterized as a struggle over meaning, with each side trying to claim the title of curator. Bigger issues are at stake, going far beyond the blurred definitions of curator, curating or curation. According to economists and other scholars, a rapid restructuring of work is currently underway, with all professions facing a decline in status and autonomy, while at the same time every kind of employment is becoming increasingly uncertain and insecure. References to curating are part of this process, with some people delineating the term to resist the displacement of the professions and others employing it to adapt to the demands of a changing economic climate.

The following discussion draws on arguments made by economists and legal scholars to consider whether or not curatorship is a profession in decline, subject to the general devaluation of expertise faced by doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, professors and many other groups (Susskind and Susskind 2015; Best 2017). According to analysts, the status of most professions has been undermined by the increasing availability of special-ized knowledge on the Internet, and the application of 'accounting logic' by administrators trying to quantify, manage and ultimately control those professions (Broadbent and Laughlin 1997). The first part of this article clarifies why advocates who describe curating as a learned practice that occurs within limited domains – museums, art galleries, alternative exhi-bition spaces – potentially do more than defend their turf in an elitist or petty manner; they respond to the wider economic and cultural shift away from respecting the autonomy and abilities of trained specialists, an issue that impacts their everyday working lives and future prospects.

The second section examines why references to curatorship are now commonly used to promote a range of practices, including cooking and doing laundry but also blogging, the online activity featured in populist accounts of curation as an act of selection and arrangement that can be applied to any domain. Authors who insist on an expansive understanding of curation argue that its current meaning has little connection with the past. Contemporary digital curation responds to the needs of the present by intervening in, organizing and distilling marketable aspects from the excessive amount of information, goods and services that would other-wise overwhelm western consumers (Bhaskar 2016; Betts and Anderson 2016). Those who describe their work as a form of curating within this new knowledge-intensive and client-driven world do not attempt to appropriate the professional aura of 'real' curators, an aura that is in fact barely recognized. On the contrary, references to curating offer them a strategic way to engage with an economic landscape in which few workers can expect to pursue a single, stable career much less a professional iden-tity (Rosenbaum 2011; Rifkin 2004). These workers must prepare for an unknown future by highlighting their employability – who they are and what they can do – not the degrees earned or positions previously held, which now bring no guarantee of either employment or respect. Yet those who support this use of the term simultaneously identify curating with human agency. They insist that certain forms of work, including

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1. interventions meant to classify discrete areas of digital consumption, must
2. be done, not by algorithms or machines, but by individuals who pursue
3. their personal inclinations. Continual references to curating strive to
4. negotiate rather than simply accept the difficult transition towards what
5. economists are calling the 'post-professional' world of the twenty-first
6. century. Analysing the diverse references to curating in contemporary
7. western culture can thus shed light on the reformulation of employment
8. and professional identity that is presently underway, while recognizing
9. this process as uneven, contentious and subject to resistance.
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12. **Curating as a Profession**
13. For at least ten years, curators of museum collections and art exhibi-
14. tions have been decrying the widespread citation of curation. According
15. to them, 'actual' curators are professionals equipped with the specialized
16. knowledge, training and experience allowing them to work with mate-
17. rial collections, create exhibitions and undertake research. Harold Koda
18. (2011), former curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan
19. Museum of Art in New York, expresses this point of view:
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21.   I have a master['s] degree in art history. I worked as an intern, as an
22.   assistant curator, at an auction house, as an art history instructor,
23.   and, finally, as a curator. I did not sit at my computer and passively
24.   click on images that appeal[ed] to me.
25.
26. Alex Ahn (2013), a freelance curator of contemporary art, agrees, insisting
27. that 'As someone who recently organized an art exhibit, I now have the full
28. respect and understanding of the severe difference between a curator and
29. a person who simply just picks what he or she likes.' Like them, gallery
30. owner Pete Martin (2013) points out that when he polled curators about
31. what they considered to be their most important function, 'not a single
32. person said "selecting"'. These authors contend that curating is an active
33. and informed practice done by experts, not people who choose or arrange
34. things based on their predilections.
35.   These arguments distinguish those who deserve the title of curator
36. from those who do not. Former curator Choire Sicha (2012) uses a
37. standard heading for his blog post by proclaiming 'You Are Not a Curator',
38. but follows it up with an unusually explicit subtitle: 'You Are Actually Just
39. a Filthy Blogger'. This reference to filth invokes the cultural tradition of
40. associating dirt with the 'lower' orders and 'unwashed' masses, borne out in
41. Sicha's classification of those who exclusively blog as low-grade collectors
42. and secondary marketers. He implies that curating is a higher, purer and
43. perhaps even sacred activity that takes place outside of the Internet. This
44. understanding of curating recurs in the publication by Koda (2011), who
45. calls the word curate 'sacred', while Stephen Calloway (2012), a curator at
46. the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, refers to curating as 'a sacred
47. world associated with museums professionals'. This elevation of curating
48. above the masses performs two functions: firstly, it portrays curating as
49. a kind of religious calling, in which a select few dedicate their life to the
50. elevation of society, rather than the pursuit of monetary gain; secondly,

it alludes to the historical use of the title curator, which from the Middle Ages in Europe has referred to either a person invested with the care of a parish or a member of the clergy. The defenders of this 'traditional' understanding of curating demand its recognition as a limited domain occupied by educated individuals who contribute to the greater good.

The fact that these and other curators strive to protect their identities by engaging with the 'dirty' blogosphere indicates, however, that their role is not as secure or clearly defined as they might like it to be. Curating is, after all, a relatively new profession, emerging in North America in its current form during the early twentieth century, supported by the American Museums Association founded in 1906, and the Canadian Museums Association in 1946 (McTavish 2013). Those who managed museums and collections throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often self-trained in natural history, undertaking a wide range of activities, from collecting specimens in the field, to building display cases, selling tickets and sweeping floors (McTavish and Dickison 2007; McTavish 2008). While various patrons and government officials endeavoured to replace these so-called 'amateurs' with specialists equipped with graduate degrees and more exclusively devoted to research – the mandate of the Carnegie Corporation's Canadian Museums Committee between 1933 and 1938 – such efforts were not entirely successful (Brison 2005; McTavish 2013: 129–52). Self-trained curators continue to run many small-town and rural museums, organizations that far outnumber the urban and comparatively well-funded ones (Nikolic 2016). Even officially recognized curators working within large institutions perform multiple duties that vary depending on shifting administrative and funding structures, making it hard for them to describe their career to others (Madžoski 2013). Such full-time and salaried curators usually have advanced degrees and many now specialize in critical curatorial studies, choosing from an array of programmes that address contemporary aesthetic debates, ethical challenges, public engagement and collections management, among other topics. Although these sophisticated programmes have enhanced the professional status of curators, pursuing degrees is not strictly required in order to become a curator. 'Superstar' contemporary art curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, currently the director of the Serpentine Gallery in London, is an autodidact who learned about art by travelling around the world to visit thousands of artists, galleries and museums. According to writer D. T. Max (2014), Obrist 'talked his way to the top' during the 1980s when curatorial schools were scarce. Obrist's ongoing 'Interview Project' (2011) documents his conversations with scholars and artists as a kind of protest against forgetting, highlighting the innovative and esteemed curators who came before him. Yet these publications simultaneously draw attention to the relative dearth of research on early curators, underlining Obrist's need to invent his own lineage and insist on his legitimate claim to expertise in the field (Obrist 2008, 2014). The professional identity of the curator is still unclear and remains subject to endless debate;[1] it is richly supported with burgeoning educational programmes and publications, but also flexible enough to allow ambitious people to take it up and reshape it.

A number of scholars embrace this flexibility, arguing that the continual adaptation of the concept of curation provides evidence of its

1. cultural relevance rather than its demise. Suse Cairns (2012), a professor
2. of museum studies at George Washington University, who blogs as
3. museum geek, insists that the broad use of the term curating is beneficial:
4. '[T]he liberal use of the term curator makes it stronger and more valu-
5. able. Some of our sector's lingo is making its way beyond the walls of our
6. institutions, and getting picked up by the mainstream in a positive way.' In
7. a later article, she and co-author Danny Birchall (2013) extend this idea,
8. arguing that museums have long acted as filters for cultural abundance, an
9. understanding now appreciated by bloggers and others who categorize
10. and manage digital data. According to Cairns and Birchall (2013), diverse
11. interpretations of curation are welcome even if they are not entirely accu-
12. rate because they move the influence of the museum beyond its walls,
13. helping to democratize museum practices by accepting new collabora-
14. tors. Curators should participate fully in this exchange of knowledge by
15. adopting algorithmic and social networking tools, possibly contributing 'to
16. an expanded museum catalogue that offers the necessary external context
17. to museum objects' (Cairns and Birchall 2013). The authors contend that
18. such activities refigure the curator as a facilitator rather than an authorita-
19. tive specialist, in keeping with the well-known challenges to conventional
20. museum practices launched since the 1980s (Hooper-Greenhill 2000;
21. Simon 2010). Although this vision portrays a museum world that is far
22. from sacred and insular, the curator remains centrally in place, becoming
23. increasingly relevant in the digital age by embracing new modes of knowl-
24. edge creation and communication. In contrast to the feared 'death of the
25. curator', this optimistic view of the future promotes the digital rebirth of
26. the profession.
27.   Scholars who study the broad trajectory of the professions are less
28. confident about their ability to survive largely intact by accepting new
29. technologies or making incremental changes.[2] These analysts do not
30. address curating directly, but find general patterns in understandings of
31. the professions, recognizing the ultimate impossibility of arriving at a
32. single definition of professionalization that could be applied to every occu-
33. pation, much less a conclusive list of which employments can currently be
34. classified as professions and which should be excluded. The father-and-
35. son team of Richard Susskind, a legal analyst and adviser, and Daniel
36. Susskind, an economist, argues that the members of today's professions
37. share overlapping similarities, albeit to varying degrees: (1) they have
38. specialist knowledge; (2) their admission depends on credentials; (3) their
39. activities are regulated; and (4) they are bound by a common set of values
40. (Susskind and Susskind 2015: 15). While the authors examine ten estab-
41. lished professions, including lawyers and doctors, these similarities, espe-
42. cially points 1, 2 and 4, are reinforced by those who defend a more limited
43. and exclusive use of the term curator. Such writers as Koda, Ahn, Sicha and
44. Calloway insist that the work of an 'actual' curator is based on the exper-
45. tise gained from either formal education or an extensive hands-on experi-
46. ence of creating exhibitions. They furthermore argue that curators pursue
47. an almost sacred calling that serves the public good, a focus on values that
48. is echoed by Cairns and Birchall (2013), who articulate the social respon-
49. sibility of curators even as these authors reject forms of specialization and
50. exclusivity. The third point about regulation is difficult to apply to such a

2. See Susskind and
Susskind (2015) and
Broadbent et al. (1997).

diverse practice as curating, for Susskind and Susskind explain that most professions are granted exclusivity over certain activities – for instance, doctors have an effective monopoly to prescribe medications – because it protects the public (2015: 17). No such privilege is enjoyed by curators, another reason why references to curating and curation can be taken up and applied to a myriad of activities.

All professions are nevertheless facing a period of decline, according to the analysts. They argue that this situation is caused by a number of factors, chief among them a diminishing trust in the value of expertise. Such longstanding professionals as doctors, lawyers, architects and more recently accountants, have been recognized to possess a technical knowl-edge of their disciplines that lay people lack and cannot easily access. Yet the rapid expansion of the Internet has changed that perception, with medical news, official reports, books, how-to videos, conference papers, tax forms and any number of sources of information readily available to literate people with networked computers (McClelland 2014; Susskind and Susskind 2015: 34–36). Though the quality of online material varies wildly, and the ability of the average person to assess it critically is debat-able, many people are less willing to trust professional guidance without question (Stanford History Education Group 2016). A person diagnosed with a serious medical condition might not be able to perform surgery, but he or she can and probably will read about the condition online, contact other patients, participate in making decisions about treatment options, and even pursue alternative treatments. Whether imagined or real, this capacity to access information empowers people, contrib-uting to an understanding of professionals as potentially elitist frauds who attempt to protect their own interests by acting as gatekeepers to knowledge (Imber 2008). If such longstanding professionals as doctors and surgeons are subject to this decline in authority, then curators are even more vulnerable to the shift. In this scenario, it matters little how the curator is defined – as expert, artist, *auteur*, researcher, caretaker, mediator, facilitator, collaborator, project manager or social activist. The identity of 'curator' is suspect, challenged and even displaced by references to user-friendly acts of selecting that can be done by pretty much anyone.

This scepticism about experts has encouraged different approaches to their evaluation. Trust based on professional mystique or the posses-sion of degrees is being replaced by trust built on transparency about the nature of professional competence (Imber 2008; Susskind and Susskind 2015: 36). In the past, professionals were considered intellectuals and thus not subject to managerial control, largely allowed to regulate their own practices. Now, however, the relative autonomy of professionals is chal-lenged, in part by neo-liberal regimes trying to control professionals, but also by demands for accountability to the public, clients and customers (Susskind and Susskind 2015: 34). Such accountability is usually defined in quantitative terms, with government officials, managers and corpo-rate patrons alike requiring numerical data about results, even when the learning outcomes, forms of community engagement, and social impact of museums and art exhibitions are ephemeral and literally impossible to count.

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1. The autonomy of most professionals is further undermined by the
2. administrative levels added to produce these outcomes and manage the
3. quantitative documents, especially when scarce funds are redirected to
4. emerging administrative and managerial roles rather than towards the
5. work more traditionally defined as professional. This is arguably the case
6. in museums, with some scholars decrying the fact that curators devoted
7. to research and caring for collections are losing positions while marketers,
8. image consultants and outreach officers are gaining them (Young 2000).
9. Yet the well-known curator of contemporary art Francesco Bonami argues
10. that the growing demand for clarity and communication stems from savvy
11. audiences, not only administrators or funders:
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13. Once as curators we were preaching to the converted. Whoever
14. dared to say that an empty shoebox in a museum was a joke was
15. considered an imbecile. Today if you are not able as a curator to
16. articulate in a comprehensible language why the shoebox is a mas-
17. terpiece YOU are the imbecile.
18. (quoted in Neuendorf 2016)
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20. Though Bonami goes on to declare that curators are irrelevant, he
21. compares them to the practice of painting, which periodically seems on
22. the verge of death but nevertheless remains a lively presence in galleries.
23. These differing interpretations indicate that accountability to a better-
24. informed public is hardly something to regret or reject, even if its long-
25. term impact on the professional curator is difficult to foresee.
26. It is helpful to portray curating as a form of work comparable to other
27. types of employment, instead of approaching it as a unique practice of
28. continuing importance. Regardless of how scholars define the role of the
29. curator, most of them assume that the profession will survive in one form
30. or another, either because or in spite of its transformation. In contrast,
31. economic analysts predict a post-professional future in which many forms
32. of specialized work are performed either by non-professionals or by
33. machines and algorithms, putting most people out of work (Rifkin 2004).
34. Some would argue that this post-professional world is already here.
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37. **Curating as a Form of Employability**
38. Digital publisher Michael Bhaskar describes curation as an endeavour
39. 'using acts of selection and arrangement (but also refining, reducing,
40. displaying, simplifying, presenting and explaining) to add value' (2016:
41. n.p.). This description implies that curatorial interventions could enhance
42. any domain, but Bhaskar focuses on how entrepreneurs can sort through,
43. simplify and sell information on the Internet (2016: 7, 61). His particular
44. attention to online publishing echoes the earlier work of entrepreneur
45. Steven Rosenbaum, whose *Curation Nation* (2011) similarly insists that
46. the western world is experiencing an unprecedented era of abundance,
47. resulting in an overload of information on the Internet that savvy bloggers
48. can 'curate' by collecting, sorting and displaying (2011: 6). The *Huffington*
49. *Post* (www.huffingtonpost.ca) is a key example of successful curation in
50. both books, for it aggregates localized and international news, attracting

millions of readers and massive revenues (Berman 2015). This prag-
matic vision of curation as a business strategy is entirely positive, with
all complexities removed by Bhaskar and Rosenbaum (Manning 2011).
The authors do not consider questions of copyright, the fair compensa-
tion of writers, the ethics of 'fake news', and the cultural impact of filtering
information so that customers can easily find only what they are already
looking for (Wingfield et al. 2016). The ideas promoted by Bhaskar and
Rosenbaum nevertheless have wide appeal, informing the way in which
curating is popularly understood today.

This contemporary use of the terms curation and curating has little
to do with the identity of the professional curator, which is considered
largely irrelevant if not entirely defunct. Rosenbaum writes his own
version of the history of curating, portraying bloggers as the first cura-
tors who find an historical precedent in the *Reader's Digest*, an aggregated
general-interest magazine founded in 1922 (2011: 23). Rosenbaum repre-
sents museum curators as an 'old guard' standing in the way of the future,
linking them exclusively with material collections and ignoring their long-
standing work with digital materials (2011: 37). Bhaskar similarly sepa-
rates 'traditional' curators from digital content, insisting that 'a self-serving
and self-regarding art world reject[s] adding false dignity to a host of
everyday practices' (2016: 5). Bhaskar nevertheless provides a fuller story
about the origins of curation, moving from Roman times to the Louvre in
a few pages before explaining that the 'curation boom' spearheaded by jet-
setters like Hans Ulrich Obrist helpfully inflated the category of curator
until it was demolished, making everyone a curator (2016: 66–69, 78). This
debatable characterization of recent curatorial practices sets the stage for
Bhaskar's explanation of how curation then became 'a sort of wayfinding
through a swamp of content' online before migrating offline (2016: 78).
His narrative recognizes earlier forms of museum and art curation, but
positions them entirely in the past and in relation to material objects, with
scant connection to the vaguely described curation now occurring every-
where.

One commonality nevertheless emerges from references to this new
understanding of curation: it is performed by a person. Within the digital
realm, curators contribute a human element that 'adds value' to the
automatic aggregation and filtering done by machines and algorithms.
According to Bhaskar, this human contribution stems from a person's
longstanding and sustained devotion to a particular subject, which makes
them an 'expert selector'. This form of expertise is based on good taste,
judgements and instincts 'honed by tens of thousands of hours of learning
and immersion', rather than professional training, certificates or degrees
(2016: 108). Bhaskar offers as an example the blues fan who runs an
amateur blog and creates playlists, insisting that he or she 'has probably
spent similar amounts of time [to a museum curator] immersing them-
selves in the sound of the Delta' (2016: 109). This increasingly common-
sense reconfiguration of expertise as a passionate and sustained dedication
to a topic helps to explain why anyone with a skill or talent can undertake
curation. Chefs can curate cheese and dry-cleaners can curate laundry
because in both cases a committed individual with specialized knowledge
has enhanced work that might otherwise seem automatic or thoughtless.

1. Such references to curation may increase the appeal of the product on
2. offer, but more importantly they promote the status of the worker, not as
3. a professional, but as a new kind of expert who is central to creating the
4. value of that product.
5.   The terms 'curation', 'curating' and 'curator' are used interchange-
6. ably by many people to convey their employability, that is, their ability
7. to do what in marketing language is called 'value creating work' based
8. on their personal qualities and capacities (Weinert 2001). According to
9. Justin Pritchard (2016), a career coach at the University of Alberta, this
10. strategy is necessary in an uncertain economy when 'it is not enough to be
11. exceptional anymore'. Building a stellar resume or earning a Ph.D. will not
12. guarantee career success; aspiring employees now need to explain how
13. they would add value to a particular workplace, differentiating themselves
14. from other qualified candidates. They must communicate their beliefs,
15. philosophies and self-concept, highlighting what makes them unique,
16. often by drawing on experiential learning and embodied knowledge
17. gained outside of paid employment, while they were pursuing a personal
18. interest with passion and dedication. The concept of curation helps to
19. navigate these changing notions of professionalism because it is vague
20. and encompassing, no longer anchored to a particular kind of expertise
21. in museum work. Curation now conveys an individual's capacity for crea-
22. tivity, alluding to personal qualities developed outside of or despite tradi-
23. tional career paths.
24.   At the same time, such popular references to curating and curation
25. can resist the potentially oppressive aspects of growing demands for
26. employability rather than employees. The terms address the redefinition
27. of expertise, alluding to such qualities as taste, judgement and even 'gut'
28. instinct that cannot (yet) be delegated to machines (Rosenbaum 2014).
29. The expansive language of curation highlights the knowledge and actions
30. of individuals, demanding respect for them in the face of declining career
31. autonomy and predictable employment. This insistence on the recogni-
32. tion of individual qualities brings those who curate cheese and playlists
33. back together with the irate 'actual' curators who demand respect for their
34. university degrees, training and long-time experience managing collec-
35. tions or producing exhibitions. Both groups lay claim to curating within
36. a changing economy that threatens or at least unsettles the identities of
37. all workers, whether they have been traditionally characterized as profes-
38. sional or not.
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41. ## Common Goals
42. According to this discussion, 'curation' is more than a buzzword or short-
43. term fad. Alongside 'curating' and 'curator', the term has persisted within
44. contemporary western culture because it carries significant meaning,
45. describing the human interventions that organize and shape digital infor-
46. mation on the Internet, as well as the creative capacities of individuals who
47. are employable in a range of domains while refusing to become cogs in
48. the machine. Museum and exhibition curators understandably rail against
49. what they see as a misuse of the title 'curator', insisting on a more limited
50. definition. Like other professionals, many curators are facing declining

autonomy, increasing workloads and administrative demands for quantifiable results. Although the 'end' of curating as a profession is questionable or at least distant, the sense that some curators have of being under siege is exacerbated when seemingly everyone takes up the once more-exclusive appellation. All the same, those claiming to curate despite a lack of professional training are largely experiencing and responding to a similar situation, finding a way to retain some autonomy and sense of self-worth in the face of diminishing career options. References to curators, curating and, especially, curation participate in the negotiation of and resistance to the current period of economic transition towards an unknown future, where professional identities will be reshaped and possibly displaced.

Acknowledgements

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