User-Curators Transform the Library

Klaus Ulrich Werner
Philological Library, Freie Universitaet Berlin, Germany
E-mail: klaus.werner@fu-berlin.de

Abstract:

Participation and involvement are keywords in a discourse about transforming the library into a more and more user-driven environment. The user is no longer a mere patron and libraries are not merely inspiring Third Places, but places where users can be inspired by users, supported by a participatory library.

There are already well-known practices of including users in processes that have an impact on the library in different fields. For example, libraries invite users to participate in collection building (patron-driven acquisition), libraries give users the opportunity to join in reference librarians' activities by making notes and recommendations that are integrated into library catalogs (context-sensitive classification), and libraries involve users in designing library space and in construction or redesign projects.

Museums have been giving visitors the freedom to curate their own exhibitions including art works from the museums' collections; libraries also may encourage users to contextualize library resources in their own way to make their research and the library collections more visible, by applying their special expertise. Art libraries seem to be predestined to do so both because of their users' special capacities as researchers in art and design, as artists, and as future professionals, and because of the specific qualities of the library collections covering visual art or arts in general.

Having users act as curators means more than just giving users a chance of having exhibitions. As users fulfill curator tasks, they select, combine and contextualize library resources like books, documents, physical objects, digital media, information, ideas, artwork, other materials, and space, and they present the results of that process – in whichever form or format. User-curators interact with library staff, and the library empowers them with knowledge of the collection, facilities, as well as linking and presenting skills; the library also assists with offline and online display. User-curators inspire other users and the community by sharing ideas and research results.

This paper categorizes different trends and formats of curatorial practices employed by library users and gives some best-practice examples taken from libraries in different countries: intelligent table (Sitterwerk Art Library, Sankt Gallen, Switzerland), Citizens as curators (National Library of Singapore), topic room (Central and Regional Library Berlin, Germany), audio guide and

performance by Benny Nemerofsky-Ramsay (Hekma and Duyves's library and Huis de Pinto Library, both Amsterdam), and learning space (Rostock University Library, Germany). As different as these projects are in character, they all demonstrate how all sides profit from users as curators.

1. Introduction

Participation and involvement are keywords in a discourse about transforming the library into a more and more user-driven environment. The user is no longer a mere patron and libraries are not merely inspiring *third places*, but places where users can also be inspired by users, supported by a participatory library. There are already well-known practices of including users in processes that have an impact on the library in different fields. For example, libraries invite users to participate in collection building (*patron-driven acquisition*), libraries give users the opportunity to join in reference librarians' activities by making notes and recommendations, which are integrated into library catalogs (*context-sensitive classification* or *social tagging*), libraries encourage users to create software tools and digital content (*library hackathons* or *library hack days*), and libraries involve users in designing library space and in building or redesigning projects. Users are no longer merely recipients of information, they can now provide their own information, create their own content and add that content to the library's (analog or digital) collection. The users' knowledge matters, and the library can help them share it.

In which fields do we find examples and projects where users take the role of curators? When users engage in these types of activities at the invitation of libraries and we use the term *curate* to refer to what they do, what does that term then mean exactly? Is it really helpful to give the user the chance of participating and being creative with library resources? – Let us first go over the word's basic meaning and the context where it comes from: museums and the arts. Then, we will have a look at different trends and formats of curatorial practices employed by library users taken from libraries in different countries: As different as these projects are in character, they all demonstrate how all sides profit from users as curators.

2. What does *curate* mean, and who is a curator?

In the context described, what does *curate* mean? – *Curating* is buzzword, it evokes a cultural phenomenon that goes far beyond the gallery and the museum and stretches right into our everyday lives. Everything seems to be *curated* today: a website, an instagram account, a blog, any social-media channel, or a techno-party – everybody seems to be curating. And last but not least, exhibitions at museums up to this day are still curated by professional curators in the traditional sense: "The curator is the most emblematic worker of the cognitive age." [1]

The verb *to curate* comes from the Latin *curare*, which means 'to take care of something or somebody' and acquired the meaning of 'to heal' during the Middle Ages. Since the 18th century, *curate* has been used to refer to taking care of art collections: selecting new items, managing the preservation of the collection, displaying and arranging the works of art, producing exhibitions, and contributing to art history. And the person in charge of all that is, of course, the curator. Today's hype of the idea of curation comes from "a feature of modern life that is impossible to ignore: the proliferation and reproduction of ideas, raw data, processed information, images, disciplinary knowledge and material products that we are witnessing today" [2]. Then there is another important phenomenon: a shift in the ratio of how much importance is accorded to making new objects or to creating new content and how

much importance is accorded to selecting from, and re-organizing, what already exists. As that ratio shifts, compilation gains more and more significance as compared to creation. Curating might be described "as the attempted pollination of culture, or a form of mapmaking that opens new routes through a city, a people or a world" [3]. It is an extremely creative process, which has moved from the exclusive field of professionals and has shifted to include non-professionals, even in museums. If we look back, we can observe premodern scholars, who had a more holistic and comprehensive picture of human life and the world than we do today. If we consider the history of the Renaissance *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, where artefacts, paintings, materials, books, samples, specimens of flora and fauna are all set into a particular context that combines arts and science, we will not be surprised that a similar concept and similarly compiled collections are becoming popular today. There are more and more museums that give visitors the freedom to curate their own exhibitions including art works from the museums' collections, frequently in digital formats: Opening the museum depot for the public to curate an exhibition is still a rather rare project even now. For instance, "we transform visitors to users" is a motto used by Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe [4], a museum in the southwest of Germany that covers history, culture, and art; visitors curate and display a topic of their own choice by selecting and combining objects from the museum's depot. It is not only for reasons of preservation that it is easier for museums to allow visitors to be digital (rather than analog) curators; digital format also has the advantage that no extra exhibition space is required for the participatory projects. *Digital Curating* provides new creative and productive perspectives for the visitor as curator provided that significant parts of the museum's collection have been digitized. That way, the visitor has sufficient digital content to work with: audio, video, scanned photographs, etc. In a semi-professional way, visitors can add content to digital objects, share their ideas on the web and on social-media platforms, but they might even do so more professionally by using special expertise from their own experience and knowledge. And with that strategy, the (open) museum also benefits – by acquiring content and by addressing new groups of visitors.

3. Libraries and digital user curation
"The connection between museums and libraries is an ancient and intimate one" [5]: The ancient Library of Alexandria, Egypt, after all, was the first museum in history. – Libraries can actualize almost the same concept and let users experiment with their digital collections. Libraries can encourage users to contextualize library resources in their own way to make their research and the library's collection more visible, by applying their special expertise. Curating in libraries is always about collecting and structuring knowledge. Art libraries seem to be predestined to do so both because of their users' special capacities as researchers in art and design, as artists, and as future professionals, and because of the specific qualities of the library collections covering visual art or arts in general [6].

The British Library has already gathered some experience with participatory (open curation) projects. Just one example: The initiative British Library Labs experiments with digital collections and has created a special open-source, collaborative social platform called Curatorial that enables users to easily access, curate, and refine the British Library's digital collections and the pertinent metadata [7]. The platform will not just assist users in contributing new metadata or in editing content, but may incorporate elements of gamification as well as social functionality [8]. These activities can open up data and content for users to provide personalized online curating experiences. With the assistance of the British Library's experts and curators, the rich cultural heritage of the library in a wide range of different collections becomes more discoverable and more connected with people and the

digital world. The British Library promotes digital curation, there are even annual awards, the British Library Labs Awards, for "outstanding and innovative work, that has been carried out by using British Library's digital collections and data" [9].

A second example is from Singapore, from the National Archives (NAS) and the National Library of Singapore (NLB): Two projects, "Citizen Archivist Project" and "Singapore Memory Project," are crowd-sourcing state-public partnerships that promote collaborative input to a national heritage and a movement towards building a common memory for this young, multicultural and multilingual nation and its citizens. And libraries have an important role to play in those activities. "Citizen Archivist Project" encourages citizens to transcribe, and provide descriptions of, materials at the NAS. That includes the transcription of labels of old music records in different languages or the description of historical photographs of the city on the basis of digitized material. The "Singapore Memory Project" aims to capture and document precious moments and memories related to the city of Singapore. Memories can be deposited by citizens, organizations, companies, and groups in the form of texts, audio files, video files, and images. An important support for those activities that involve curating citizens in the creation of the city's memory is the oral history movement, a movement that libraries have a very important part in: Storytelling is one of the main library programs, and it is closely linked to the work of the Oral History Centre. In the cooperative effort, gaps in the official history records are closed; personal (sometimes emotional or even traumatic) experiences are added; what is missing from printed sources is supplied as oral testimony to expand the city's memory. The individual content contributed by citizens, in combination with geo-referenced maps and an increasing amount of digitized documents, is forming an incomparable and increasingly complex memory – that only continues to grow.

4. Collecting knowledge
The well-known *Themenraum* (topic room) of the Central and Regional Library Berlin, Germany, presents interdisciplinary analog and digital materials from the library's collection, concerning a specific topical or cultural issue on a monthly basis in a defined space within the library between the reading room, the café, and the auditorium. It was redesigned, and a new feature was added in the beginning of 2018: Users were invited to produce compilations on a topic – the first topic was both motivating and touching: Love – and to collect, design and present aspects of the topic from various perspectives and through media both from the library's collection and resources and beyond. The library provided support, know-how, and the venue to the curating citizens. A video trailer was created to advertise the project and to invite user-curators; a jury selected the best contributions. This interesting example went beyond curation on the basis of the library collection. I mentioned it because the initial concept was already presented at an IFLA world congress a couple of years ago [10].

The Sitterwerk Art Library, located in the northeast of Switzerland near the city of Sankt Gallen (famous for the monastery library founded in 719), is a reference library open to the public [11]. The library opened in 2006 with 25,000 books, the private collection of Daniel Rohner (1948–2007), a Swiss collector of books with a very wide focus on art and design. There are four divisions under the roof of the Sitterwerk Foundation: the art library, a large materials archives, an exhibition and storage space for works of the sculptor Hans Josephsohn, and three studios for artist residencies (there is an art foundry famous art foundry on the site too). The main part of the book collection is presented on open shelves – without any steady order. Instead, there is a kind of dynamic order that arises through usage. Library users can find a specific book by checking the catalog, which is updated every day. It is intended that the users change the books' locations on the shelves. Every night, an RFID

detector wanders along the rows of the shelves; it checks the location of every book and updates the catalog information. The next morning, the catalog contains all the information necessary to visualize the exact location of the books on the shelves. Referring to art historian Aby Warburg and his special idea of an alternative classification in a library focused on a special order of knowledge, Sitterwerk decided not to apply any classification – except that of the users' own order [12]. One user may create a cluster or clusters of books, and subsequent users may find trails along that personal order. Users contextualize their research, make it visible and share it with other users who can then explore one anothers' arrangements of knowledge.

The newest feature at Sitterwerk is a project called *Werkbank*, an RFID-sensitive, 'smart' table [13]. Every item or object on the table can be documented digitally and can be connected to the already existing dynamic system of organization in the printed collection. The art library's physical archives and the materials archives are thereby made accessible in a new way – as a digital tool on site as well as on the Internet. Not only the library books, but also the items in the materials collection are equipped with RFID tags, and RFID detectors transform that long table in the center of the reading room into a sensitive table that makes relationships between books and materials visible. The RFID-equipped table identifies books and other items placed on it, and it links bits of contents that are related to one another – no matter from which collection. As an interface between user and medium, the table is also equipped with cameras, which enable users to add analog personal notes, photographs, and contents from books to the compilation on the table – in a piece of artwork, one would speak of *assemblage*. A digital platform designed especially for the library makes it possible to record comments on individual research and readings. The results of this interlinking of elements of knowledge can be depicted digitally in existing layout templates and also printed out on paper, bound in notebook format. Printed booklets produced through that procedure can also be added to the library collection or be used as publications (so-called bibliozines) for other users who are interested in the work of a particular user-curator. Researchers, individual users, or working groups can use such analog-digital tools to save their knowledge structures, as well as for archiving and for display. – It's a complex new interactive environment for connecting content, structuring knowledge, and developing archiving strategies, and at the same time it serves as an innovative multi-media platform for curating library materials.

5. Curating Library Space

An academic, undergraduate library has a high ambition relating to what it would provide to its users: a perfect learning space in accordance with Andrew McDonald's famous "Top Ten Qualities of good library space" [14]. The idea of letting patrons participate in a library design process is not new; there are many good-practice examples from different types of libraries [15]. Methods of (participatory) design are often implemented nowadays; innovative processes via design thinking – that approach is a real mega-trend [16]. But the experiment of the University Library at Rostock, a German city near the Baltic See, has gone further than just involving users in design thought processes for developing the next-generation library learning space. The library's users have curated a space for collaborative learning by themselves as temporary interior designers. The decisions on the design and the furniture for the learning space were left completely to the patrons [17]. The basic elements of the project were these: curation of a small new learning space (not a re-design), a defined space (an extension not used before), a fixed budget, a briefing session at the beginning, and access to the resources of the library (not in the form of conventional assistance, which often translates to domination by the 'assisting' librarians). The challenge was to give the users the

opportunity to have the full power to curate – by minimizing the risks for everybody. And believe me: It was a success, as presented at the poster session at the IFLA congress in Columbus in 2016 [18].

6. Artists as user-curators

Canadian media artist and library-user Benny Nemerofsky-Ramsay, based in Berlin and postgraduate at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, was inspired several times by the intense and vibrant intellectual atmosphere around collections of printed and archival materials in the very special space of a library. His idea then was to create a new kind of audio guide, very different from the traditional ones used in art galleries and museums – for which he has also devised unusual creations [19]. He got in touch with a private library and archives in Amsterdam, where he produced his first audio guide for a library. He has created a genre that can be defined as a sequence (or, to use a musical term, a *suite*) of *Hörstücke* (audio pieces or sound-art compositions) for a guided expedition, an artistic medium for libraries (finished for Hekma and Duyves's library and Huis de Pinto Library, both Amsterdam; in preparation for the Philological Library at Freie Universitaet Berlin, the so-called 'Berlin Brain,' forthcoming in 2019). Personal pieces will serve multiple purposes: first of all, that of inviting listeners to an evocative and conceptual *flânerie* (a casually observing stroll) through a library as a space for dissemination and preservation of ideas. In general, his work mediates subjectivities between spectators, artworks, archives, and the library space. His library audio guides, however, will mainly constitute evocative guided walks. Nemerofsky's pieces are motivated not so much by any didactic or informative intention, placing focus instead on emotional, philosophical and choreographic encounters with the library. His conceptual starting points are the art of being a reader, of searching for a book within a collection, the phenomenon of serendipity, the library as an infinite, unmeasurable space, bibliophilia and the affective potential of book objects, books versus digitization, reproduction and the aura of the authentic. Nemerofsky-Ramsay's audio guides are the result of 'deep listening,' and they demand deep listening. An amazing attempt to concentrate on audio and on sound, a rare counter-trend in the global age of visualization, or maybe a complementary trend . . .

7. Conclusion

Giving users the opportunity to work as curators means more than just giving them a chance to curate their own exhibitions. Users fulfilling curator tasks can select, combine and contextualize library resources like books, documents, physical objects, digital media, information, ideas, artwork, other materials, and space, and they present the results of that process – in whichever form or format. User-curators interact with the library staff, the library provides access to the cultural record, empowers the user-curators with knowledge of the collection, facilities, as well as linking and presenting skills; the library assists with offline and online display and digital infrastructure. User-curators inspire other users and the community by sharing ideas and research results.

Curators of the 20th century knew that curating art means creating something new, in the 21st century we now know that curating digitally can mean creating knowledge and relevant content in a more efficient way. Moreover, involving non-professional users instead of exclusively professional curators means sharing that knowledge with citizens. Today, as everybody can put content on the web, is it still the task of libraries and librarians to decide which content and how much of it should be presented and how it should be distributed in the most beneficial way? The real challenge might just be to muster the courage to allow and support user involvement.

The benefit for libraries and librarians might be no less than assisting users in transforming into citizens who get involved and participate in the transformation of societies.

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