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Content Curators and Twitter: Earning Attention in the Age of Distractions

“What is it that makes the economy hum, but is not growing? What’s the limiting factor behind all those web pages, business plans, strategies, books and articles, marketing initiatives, partnerships and alliances, and expansion initiatives? An attentive human mind.” (Davenport & Beck, 2001).

It is an understatement to say that the internet contains a surfeit of content; it is currently estimated to be 27.3 billion pages in size (World Wide Web Size, 2010). Despite a clear need to organize and curate this information, both individuals and organizations remain primarily committed to increasing its volume: uploading endless videos, blog posts, tweets, press releases, web copy, and presentations, a torrent made possible by the ease and low cost of creation and distribution in the digital age. Large and profitable business models have risen around this deluge: “content farms” like Associated Content and Demand Media solicit and publish user-generated content written hastily by low-paid freelancers at the rate of 4,000 articles and videos a day, (Roth, 2009) the results of which increasingly flood search-engine results.

So what’s the problem with this approach? The problem is us: specifically, the capacity of our attention span, which remains a fixed and limited resource in this environment of digital overabundance. Economist Herbert Simon identified the emergence of this “attention economy” back in the dawn of the computer age:

“...in 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." (Simon, 1971)

7 Chunks in Twenty Seconds

By its earliest days, the internet had already taxed the capacity of our attention. *Attention* refers to the allocation of short-term memory to external stimuli – in other words, what a person is focused on in a given moment. Short-term memory is a fixed and highly limited resource; usability expert Jakob Nielsen asserts that, in regards to attentional capacity, "...humans have extremely limited brainpower. For example, short-term memory famously holds only about 7 chunks of information, and these fade from your brain in about 20 seconds." (Nielsen, 2009)

In 1968, American psychologists Richard Atkinson and Richard Shrifin developed a model describing the formation of memory that explains the purpose and inherent limits of attention: (Passer & Smith, 2010)



- **Stage 1, sensory memory**, describes the brain's automatic, brief intake of sensory information, like images and sounds.
- **Stage 2, short-term memory** describes the brain's limited ability to store and process approximately 7 units of information (words, digits, images) for a brief period of time (under 30 seconds). For this to take place, our attention must be allocated exclusively to this information. This by definition sharply narrows what we can store when confronted with an abundance of signals (such as millions of internet search results).
- **Stage 3, long-term memory**, is where memories that have been effectively repeated and encoded in the short-term memory stage are moved to long-term storage, where they "endure outside of immediate consciousness" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010).

Attention, like money, is a resource that companies seek to earn; it is also a currency that consumers must learn to wisely spend. But how? Google's algorithmic search engine, which typically returns millions of results for a basic search and has not changed significantly in over a decade, remains the sole lens through which most people seek to find the one or two items worth their attention amidst 87 billion pages of noise. Are there more effective tools or strategies people can use to better spend the limited resource of their attention when confronted with digital abundance?

Filter Failure

During his keynote at the 2008 Web 2.0 Expo in New York, Author Clay Shirky re-framed the problem of information overload as one of filter failure:

"The cost of producing anything by anyone has fallen through the floor. And so there's no economic logic that says that you have to filter for quality before you publish. What we're dealing with now is not the problem of information overload...thinking about information overload isn't accurately describing the problem; thinking about filter failure is." (Shirky, 2008)

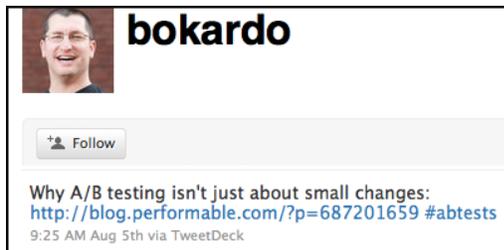
Shirky argues that the onus on filtering for quality that has traditionally fallen to publishers, due to the formerly high cost of producing content, has now been shifted to individuals. Currently available content filtering methods rely on programming, such as search engine algorithms and recommendation engines, like the one used by Amazon. (Smallbiztechnology.com, 2008) However, filtering strategies that leverage a key strength of the print era—human judgment—are beginning to emerge.

Twitter and the role of the Content Curator

Technology bloggers are beginning to identify a rising role in the social media landscape: that of the "content curator." Content curators are human experts in a particular field (for example, usability engineering or parenting) who locate, organize, and distribute links to relevant, high-quality content online, voluntarily assuming a quality filtering role that traditional publishers once held:

“The future of the social web will be driven by these Content Curators, who take it upon themselves to collect and share the best content online for others to consume and take on the role of citizen editors, publishing highly valuable compilations of content created by others. In time, these curators will bring more utility and order to the social web.” (Bargava, 2009)

Identification of and access to subject matter experts, or content curators, is not always easy in the open architecture of the internet, which partially explains the rise of the micro-blogging service Twitter. Twitter is an optimal environment for content curators to connect with audiences, because it allows experts to build a following and continually broadcast relevant links to a self-selected audience.



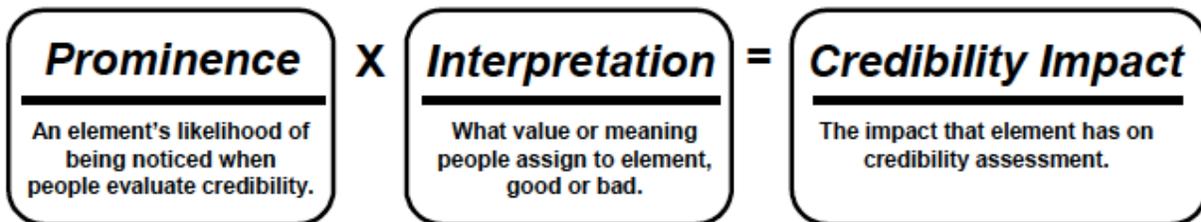
Joshua Porter (bokardo, named on Twitter after his popular blog), for example, is a well-regarded interface usability engineer who communicates professional insights and industry links to a network of 12,000 Twitter followers.

Thousands like him are able to capture and hold the elusive attention of a relevant audience on Twitter, something most web pages fail to accomplish, because Twitter allows content curators to send a distinct and easily-identifiable signal amidst a large volume of informational distractions. What Twitter qualities allow curators to capture the attention of the right audience?

- Twitter allows curators to maintain photographs, biographies, and links to web credentials that establish their identity and expertise. With celebrities, identity is sometimes even externally verified by Twitter.
- Other users re-tweet and follow effective curators on Twitter, further establishing their reach and reputation.
- Curators can tag their own posts, making relevant information easier for users to find. In this example, the tag #abtests returns the above tweet in a Twitter search about A/B testing, a sub-topic of interest to usability engineers.

Prominence-Interpretation Theory

Twitter's closed environment and recommendation-based structure allows an expert's authority, reputation, and presentation skills — key components in attracting the attention of others in traditional media environments like television and print publishing— to become more discoverable, which is not as easily accomplished in the open architecture of the internet. Twitter helps people effectively establish authorial credibility, as described by psychology's prominence-interpretation theory: (Fogg, 2003)



Prominence-interpretation theory states that in order for people to determine whether a source is credible, it must first earn their attention: “before a web site element can affect a user’s credibility assessment of the site, the user must first notice the element” (Fogg, 2003) and then users will determine the information’s credibility based on certain factors (assumptions, knowledge of the subject, and context). Twitter maximizes the opportunity for both prominence and interpretation by providing a trusted, closed environment (the Twitter platform), an author photograph, a biography, links to credentials, external verification of identity (in the case of celebrities), recommendations from others in the form of follower counts and retweets, authentic authorial voice (a real person speaking in real time), and search results based on authors themselves tagging information meaningfully, as opposed to algorithms that can be manipulated by search optimization strategies, like those employed by content farms.

Keeping The Attention You’ve Earned

Twitter provides an ideal platform for content curators to earn the scarce attention of relevant users, but curators must employ certain strategies to retain this focus once it is earned. Angela Dunn, of the social media blog Blogbrevity, recommends the following strategies to effectively curate content on Twitter over the long term: (Dunn, 2010)

- **Focus your topic**, and provide a 70/20/10 split of information: 70% related to your main industry, 20% to a related subtopic, and 10% that establishes your personality and interests.
- **Stay relevant** by using Google Alerts, Twitter search, Twitter Chat, search engines, and by following conferences and reading the blogs of competitors.
- **Provide the right information** at the right time: link to relevant presentations and how-tos, contribute answers to crowdsourced questions, and know when your industry is online and when they need information.
- **Don't just broadcast.** Contribute to existing conversations and promote the work of peers. Follow a lot of people. Curate Twitter lists of other experts in your field.

Conclusion

People need guidance to focus their limited attention on relevant information in an ever-increasing digital deluge. Programmatic solutions like search engines have thus far failed to be a truly effective filter for the increasing noise. Twitter, however, has leveraged a historically successful strategy to accomplish this: human intellectual authority, formerly the purview of traditional print and media publishers. Twitter's content curators are experts who, using Twitter's tools, establish discoverability and authority, enabling them to hold the attention of audiences who seek relevant and trusted information. It is a reminder that despite the technical advances of recent decades, people's attention is still most effectively held by human qualities like personal connection and credibility.

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