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THE CASE FOR INSIGHT CURATION IN AN ERA OF DATA OVERLOAD  
BY GREG HEIST AND AMY PERIFANOS

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Despite curation being a trendy topic these days, there is no clear definition of how it fits into the world of marketing insights. Though its application is most widely known to the art world, as a philosophy it has been evolving for 2,000 years. Insight curation not only exemplifies the past rushing into the future but stands to illuminate information in the marketing insights industry.

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**N ONGOING DISCUSSIONS** with corporate insight teams, an unmet need is emerging, one that takes volumes of data, strips it free of clutter and deftly makes apparent the answers corporations seek and the strategies upon which they wish to build.

Insight curation is the artful synthesis and preservation of consumer insights to ensure organizations grasp true signals of consumer wisdom amid the increasing noise generated by information overload. In and of itself, the signal stands alone as a beacon of direction. Curation helps organizations see the forest from the trees. It cuts a path forward. Processes like this require great depth and breadth from insights groups. Curation demands we not just go deep into the hole of research and collaborate with stakeholders, brand teams and channel partners, but also demands constant sifting, documenting and storytelling to preserve meaning in the context of broader corporate strategies.

From the CMO to the insights director's tween daughter, we are all avid followers of social trends. The emergence of content curation as epitomized by Drudge, Reddit, Pinterest and even Songza has hooked us. Their explosive growth provides a clear sign within our industry that there is unmistakable power in curation, whether people are conscious of it or not. And while we are identifying insight curation, we also get that the industry has not yet discovered its transformational potential. Like so many processes utilized in corporations and agencies, insight curation will need to be tamed and mastered.

In order to acknowledge what insight curation actually is, let's first examine why it is time for corporations to embrace the concept.

### **WE'RE DROWNING IN DATA**

Every day, 2.5 quintillion bytes of data are created, with 90% of the world's data having been generated in just the past two years. Taking a close look at primary data alone, companies across the globe invest about \$33.5 billion in market research. When you factor in the explosion of passive data, the result is a tsunami of ubiquitous yet incomprehensible information that organizations need to harness. With all of this noise around us, distinguishing true signals becomes even more critical, if not imperative. Our natural default bias is toward the loudest and latest—making it the dominant factor that shapes our worldview.

We're inclined to ignore slow-moving objects or those that don't have a light shining on them. Yet true signals, like the rarest gems, are the ones quietly waiting to be uncovered—those most worthy of preservation.

### **WISDOM IN ISOLATION**

If data is a deluge, then we're forced to look at where it's being deposited. As organizations become more complex and diversified, business units tend to hold information in silos. As a consequence, "ownership" of data—how it's collected and who has access to it—is stifling organizations. This compartmentalization diminishes the ability to synthesize learning. More specifically, it's an ongoing challenge to connect the dots and see bigger patterns with internal and external data. Nearly impossible to reign in, this growing web of information has become far too complicated to live up to its fullest potential.

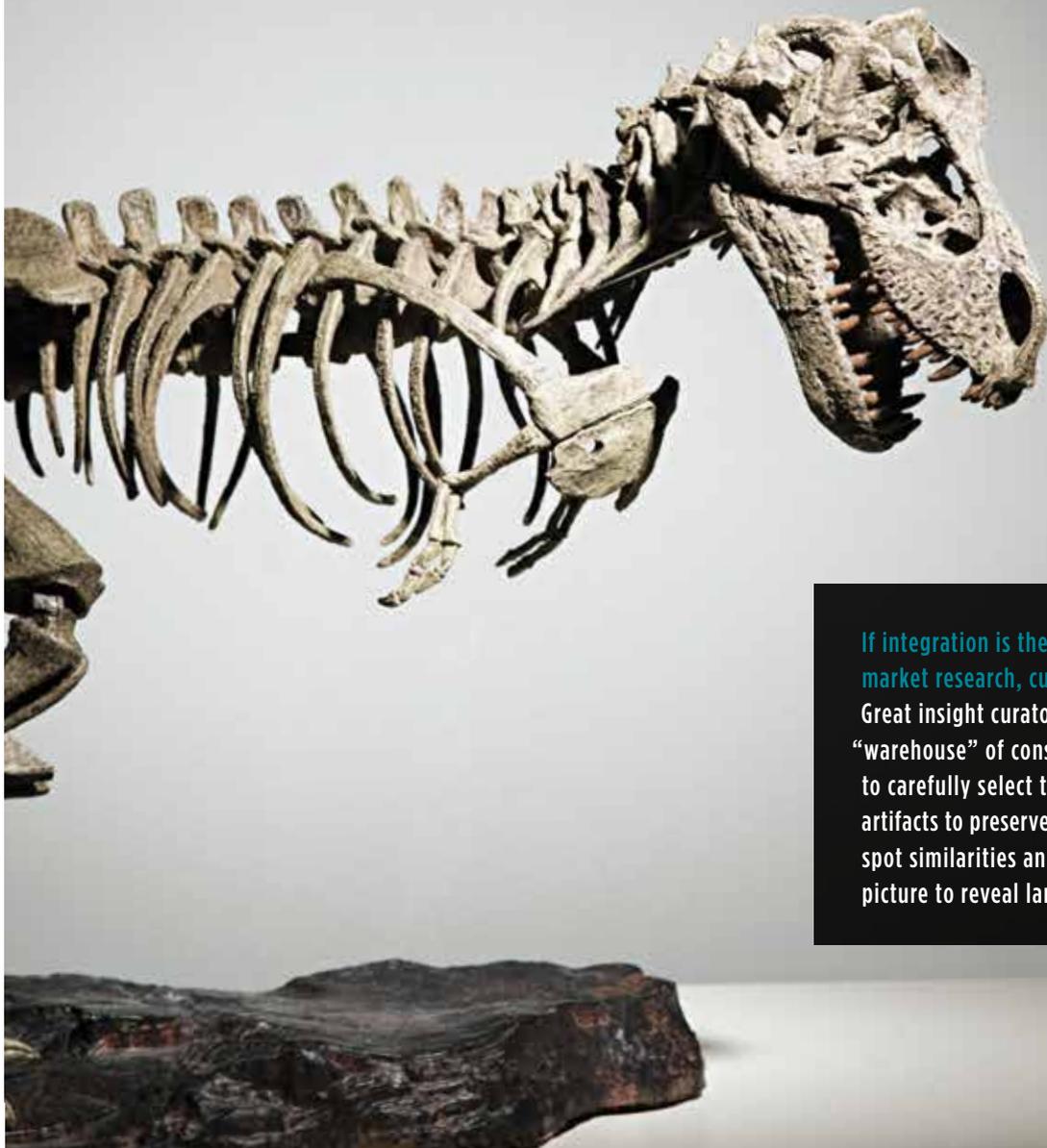
### **OUR BRAINS ARE REDLINING**

We are a culture of hardcore multitaskers. Checking an average of 40 sites a day and switching apps 36 times an hour, our minds are constantly switching gears to play catch up with our lives. Consider the items you have open right now. Technology, no doubt, helps us manage these demands, yet emerging research suggests it's taking a toll on our brains. The consequence is an impairment of our ability to see the big picture (Bainbridge Leadership) and make good decisions. In fact, Temple University's Center for Neural Decision-Making found that giving people too much information causes them to "reach cognitive and information overload, which leads to poor decision-making and errors."

In the midst of this saturation is where we see a glaring need to slow everything down to a crawl in order to pinpoint glowing nuggets that lead to answers and solutions, not merely to sate client need. It takes a certain degree of dexterity to read between the lines.

These three dynamics drive insight curation's *raison d'être*—and show why more of us should be passionate about it. It will revolutionize how organizations think about preserving and socializing consumer insights.

Once reserved for academics and scientists, the dinosaur becomes accessible to the public inside a natural history museum. Carefully designed by the museum curator, the exhibit allows visitors to “live and breathe” the life of the Tyrannosaurus rex.



If integration is the science of market research, curation is the art. Great insight curators dig through the “warehouse” of consumer information to carefully select the most important artifacts to preserve, recognize patterns, spot similarities and paint a cohesive picture to reveal larger trends.



## The evolution of curation in four periods

### **THE CURATORE**

#### **Roman times, physical structure**

Curation dates back to the Roman Empire. Curatores, as they were called, were bureaucrats with the directive to build out the infrastructure of the empire, including the famous Roman roads and aqueduct system. Their influence spread even more broadly to include the flow of currency and the procurement of commodities.

The curatore brought order and structure in a very physical sense. It played an important role within the Roman empire and became the very foundation of curation as we know it today.

### **THE CURÉ**

#### **14th through 19th century, spiritual structure**

By the 14th century, curation added a more spiritual component. A curé was a priest entrusted with the “care of souls” through the practice of spiritual direction. This was an early precursor to modern-day psychotherapy.

One of the foremost examples was St. John Vianney, the Curé d’Ars. St. John was drawn to the priesthood as a teenager, entering the seminary at the age of 14. He promptly flunked out ... almost.

His superiors saw something extraordinary in him, and with their support St. John was ordained. More than 20,000 people a year made a pilgrimage to the small French village of Ars seeking his guidance and enlightenment. The Curé d’Ars became an example of a curator’s power to transform complexity into spiritual clarity.

### **ART CURATION**

#### **20th century, story-through-art structure**

In the 20th century, the idea of curation morphed into its modern form—the contextual display of art in museums. The clip from the end of the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* personifies the vastness of source material from which the curators begin their work.

The curator’s role is to bring a select portion of this vast collection to life. In order to do this, they must offer structure and context to select pieces in a gallery setting. Their ultimate purpose is to ensure onlookers understand the significance of art as it relates to the artists’ perspective, the time period, religious or governmental undertones and cultural currents.

### **CONTENT CURATION**

#### **21st century, infotainment structure**

There is white-hot buzz around the consumer’s role in content curation, be it with music (Discover music, Songza), imagery (Pinterest) or digital content (Pearltrees, Digg). Platforms with crowd-sourced content have universalized the curator’s role, and there is the dichotomy. Content curation has deviated from its historical roots, lacking the discipline and influence of a seasoned curator.

However, content curation draws its power—and its popularity—by being a convenient measure to bring order and clarity amid an era of data abundance.

## As organizations become more complex and diversified, business units tend to hold information in silos. It's an ongoing challenge to connect the dots and see bigger patterns with internal and external data.

Insights curation transforms the way we find meaning and socialize insights through the artful synthesis of information.

Let's take an insider's look at what it will take for industry thought leaders to move from researcher to curator, and why it's not only possible but necessary.

### THE JOURNEY FROM RESEARCHER TO CURATOR

As we unveil these findings that expedite that “aha!” moment through the clutter of information, we are simultaneously ushering in a new way the research community will think about how organizations socialize and preserve consumer wisdom. Curation is a distinctly different philosophy from the traditional market research analytical mindset. As such, this will require company leaders to pioneer new approaches, employ new skillsets and perhaps even restructure resources in support of curation. To help illustrate this concept, think of the steps a team of paleontologists go through to uncover a dinosaur:

#### • Collection

The paleontologists travel to a specific dig site to uncover what they believe to be bone fragments from a particular species. They catalog and examine the disparate bones knowing very little about how they are actually interrelated.

#### • Connection

Assembling the bones begins to reveal a skeletal structure of a dinosaur. The team confirms it is a Tyrannosaurus rex and begins to connect this dinosaur to existing science. The paleontologists are able to deduce its diet, its environment and even how it moved. While they haven't yet focused on its role in the larger ecosystem of the era, they are able to determine significant patterns and form theories. The story at this point, however, is just about one dinosaur.

#### • Curation

Once reserved for academics and scientists, the dinosaur becomes accessible to the public inside a natural history museum. Carefully designed by the museum curator, the exhibit allows visitors to “live and breathe” the life of the Tyrannosaurus rex. It carefully captures its ancient habitat, giving visitors a full experience of the time. The story has evolved to be far more than just this one dinosaur. The bigger picture comes to life—bringing context and understanding to how this discovery has impacted the world as we know it.

That same progression of uncovering a dinosaur takes on significant relevance as we view it through the lens of the market research industry:

#### • Era of Data

The parallel to the dig site, this era corresponds to the time when researchers had few alternatives to collecting information. It was characterized by a one-dimensional focus on the point-in-time measurement and exhaustive analysis of data in isolation. It was the era of scientific 100-page reports with the researcher as “neutral observer.” By and large, market research has moved beyond this one-dimensional frame and has largely transitioned into the era of integration.

#### • Era of Integration

Paleontology became more powerful when it began connecting disparate discoveries and piecing together what the prehistoric world looked like. Likewise, market research is at a pivotal point in its evolution. We've embraced the importance of adding context and finding the greater story. We dig past the obvious, triangulating various data sources to identify new layers and nuances to bring the narrative to life. This era is also characterized by leveraging applied mathematics to make sense of primary and enterprise data. We're experimenting and employing advanced data visualization to simplify the increasingly abundant and complex streams of information. At this point, data libraries and indexing are still seen as the Holy Grail. The era of integration's mandate is focused on solving specific problems that answer pressing questions. At this point, the Tyrannosaurus rex is not yet in the museum.

#### • Era of Curation

If integration is the science of market research, curation is the art. Great insight curators dig through the “warehouse” of consumer information to carefully select the most important artifacts to preserve, recognize patterns, spot similarities and paint a cohesive picture to reveal larger trends. But that's only part of their value equation. Insight curators have an uncanny ability to convey their interpretation of “science meeting art” to broader audiences in enduring ways.



**As a curator, you drive the story, offer a bold point of view and identify areas of opportunity such as white space, product innovation and go-to market strategies.**

Moreover, we've seen disparate areas of organizations out of sync with each other, and in worse case scenarios, moving in separate directions. Since insight curation is laser-focused on preserving and conveying meaning in consumable ways, it not only jump-starts organizational comprehension but enables corporations to act on consumer wisdom in a unified way.

Secondly, companies have to further drive smart spending. Global economic and competitive pressures continue to strain budgets, yet the significant investment organizations continue to spend on gathering information doesn't always constitute savvy spending. By expanding its universe, insight curation drives higher ROI. Today, data commissioned by a particular team stays with that team. In a curation-savvy organization, studies become part of the tapestry of wisdom—accessible to all. Insight curation takes a more holistic view of corporate strategy and weaves consumer knowledge into a broader context. It provides a unique perspective of the overall landscape—what the organization knows and what it doesn't. This helps avoid the all-too-common phenomena of duplicated research.

And finally, those willing to absorb insight curation's best practices must have a commitment to being a catalyst for change. Embracing the behaviors and mindset of a curator will shift the mindset of market researchers from a "data librarian" to that of an "agent provocateur." It catalyzes deeper thought into the true nature of the problem. As a curator, you drive the story, offer a bold point of view and identify areas of opportunity such as white space, product innovation and go-to market strategies.

Insight curation is more than a clever philosophy. It is a powerful force for transforming knowledge management and the role of consumer insights within an organization. The era of this newest model of evaluation and foresight requires new thinking and visionary leadership to realize its full potential. ■

The progressive path to successfully integrating clients' needs amid the noise will require the industry to embrace this very art that will unlock new value for corporations continuing to struggle with the complex sea of insights that inundate them daily.

### **KEYS TO CREATING NEW ENTERPRISE VALUE**

Unless insight curation can unleash new kinds of enterprise value within the organization, it will become an intellectual curio without a meaningful role in the future evolution of our discipline. For those willing to embrace it and wholly own it, there are corporate "dividends" that should be identified.

First, we see clearly that organizations must create cohesion. Corporations should not resemble ants scurrying in different directions. In all of its complexity, the modern enterprise is running at an ever-accelerating pace. As a consequence, this leaves no space for quality "think time."

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