

# A researcher's survival guide to information overload and curation tools

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*Between constant email access through your smart phone and twitter conversations that pay no heed to boundaries of time or location, it's easy to get lost in an online information overload. [Mark Carrigan](#) writes that curation tools are the only thing that can save a busy researcher's sanity.*



Do you suffer from information overload? Do you find it difficult to organise and process the things you find online so that you can apply them productively in your day-to-day working life? If so then *curation tools* could transform your experience of the digital world. Increasingly seen as the 'next big thing' of social media, the last year has seen an explosion of different tools which can be used to manage, sort and catalogue material. However the novelty, as well as the choices available, render them confusing – what tool should you use and how should you use it? Furthermore what are the specific uses to which academics can put these tools?

Curation is the broader concept behind [Pinterest](#), by far the most famous of these tools, which was the subject of Deborah Lupton's great [article](#) a few weeks ago. She notes how Pinterest;

*“draws upon the idea of older techniques of collage or scrapbooking: collecting interesting images, grouping them together under a theme and displaying them to others.”*

It allows the user to go round the internet, collecting images they find through the use of a convenient browser button (in a similar way to creating new browser bookmarks) and make these titled pinboards available online. Crucially, it also allows users to add a commentary to each 'pinned' item and, I would argue, this is where *collating* online material becomes *curating* in the proper sense of the term. As Lupton says, few academics seem to have heard of Pinterest. Yet even fewer academics, as well as internet users more broadly, seem to realise how many curation tools are out there. I briefly discuss four I've experimented with below though, I should stress, there are others out there. At the heart of all these tools are the same core practical tasks which anyone working in an information rich environment faces: *collecting, sorting, evaluating and sharing information*.

While Pinterest is primarily focused on images, the others are, arguably, more versatile. Furthermore as Lupton astutely points out of Pinterest and its 'pinboards', these tools tend to be structured around some central embodied metaphor e.g. 'bundling' up a range of things you find online or 'scooping up' things you find online and pasting them into your 'magazine'. Beyond the practical features of each, for instance the centrality of images in Pinterest, I would suggest that these metaphors are actually a key factor in why particular individuals will take to particular services e.g. without realising it I've been thinking in bundles for a long time and just *got* the point of the service instantly when I used it. So it's definitely worth experimenting with them and seeing which one you're most intuitively comfortable with. Much as with other digital tools, there's no 'right' or 'wrong' way to use these – it all comes down to your practical purposes, how they unfold as you experiment with different tools and which ones you ultimately find most useful for your personal needs.

1. [Storify](#) is perhaps the mostly widely known of these four. It allows you to search multiple social networks and knit together items you find into sequential stories. I've found this useful for preserving Twitter debates that I've particularly [enjoyed](#). However I'm aware this only represents part of what the tool is capable of if you combine a sufficiently diverse range of elements, whereas my

uses have merely been reconstructing conversations on one medium that I was actively involved in. The most impressive uses I've seen have tended to revolve around [covering events](#) either retrospectively or live.

2. [Bundlr](#) is my personal favourite and I can't recommend it enough. As with the others, you use a browser button to 'bundle' content. When you're on a web page which you want to curate, press the button and either choose an existing bundle or make a new one. What's most impressive about Bundlr is how it combines the ability to handle many types of content (e.g. youtube videos, images, tweets, presentations, web pages) with effortlessly making the finished product look aesthetically appealing. With their latest update this became particularly true of [embedding bundles in webpages](#). It's also incredibly easy to pick up. Within a few hours of signing up to Bundlr I had multiple bundles which had collectively received hundreds of hits. I honestly don't understand how I kept track of things I wrote and read online prior to using the service.
3. [Scoop.It](#) allows you to publish 'magazines' based on content you scoop through a browser bookmark. Whereas some of the other tools focus more on collating items, Scoop.It offers more room for curation : it gives you more opportunity than the other tools to control what aspects of your 'scooped' items are highlighted and what commentary you offer about them. It also has an interesting, though in my experience not quite perfected, tool which offers you ideas about things to 'scoop'. One feature I particularly like about Scoop.It is that it lets you tweet whenever you scoop a new item. In this way it integrates the curation process with managing twitter accounts. Though this might not be appealing to everyone, it's a potentially invaluable time saver for those who manage multi-author blogs and multiple social media accounts. I like Scoop.It a lot and, if I had more time, I'd use this. Although I'd qualify this by saying I'd use it in my capacity as a social media manager rather than as an academic researcher.
4. [Pearl Trees](#) is perhaps the most intriguing and yet, in my experience, the least practical. It takes a mind-mapping approach to curation, enabling you to collect 'pearls' (webpages, text notes or photos) and arrange them into hierarchical structures. I found it fascinating to explore and the interface is *very* different to anything else I'd come across. Nonetheless, I just didn't 'get' it, beyond my abstract curiosity. It's worth trying though and, even if your reaction is the same as mine, it's definitely one to watch. When researching this article, I discovered that since I last used Pearl Trees they've introduced 'bi-directional' synchronization with social media. So rather than just auto tweeting when you add an item to your Pearl Tree, it can also add a pearl whenever you tweet a link. In practice I suspect this might not work as it should but, nonetheless, it has certainly induced me to give Pearl Trees another go.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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