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Freeing Knowledge: Approaches to Foster Collaboration Between Academic Libraries and the Wikipedia Community

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Abstract

Wikipedia has become a ubiquitous source for information, as well as a global community of people dedicated to the free exchange of knowledge. While its convenience may seem at first glance to be a threat to the traditional role of libraries, an overlap of purpose fosters unique opportunities for working together to advance free access to high-quality information and empower learning. This article will address these opportunities by providing specific examples of ways in which libraries can collaborate with Wikipedia to achieve the common goal of making information more accessible, while increasing their utility beyond their local community. An overview of resources to facilitate this endeavor will be provided, along with example projects aimed at exposing library content, teaching information literacy skills, and engaging communities.

Keywords

Wikipedia, libraries, collaboration

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Wikipedia has become a ubiquitous source for information, as well as a global community of people dedicated to the free exchange of knowledge. While its convenience may seem at first glance to be a threat to the traditional role of libraries, an overlap of purpose fosters unique opportunities for working together to advance free access to high-quality information and empower learning. This article will address these opportunities by providing specific examples of ways in which libraries can collaborate with Wikipedia to achieve the common goal of making information more accessible, while increasing their utility beyond their local community. An overview of resources to facilitate this endeavor will be provided, along with example projects aimed at exposing library content, teaching information literacy skills, and engaging communities.

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Background

Wikipedia has become an established source for information on the web. Easy access and usual prominence of Wikipedia within the first few hits for many web searches has made it a quick reference for facts and a common place to turn for orientation to unfamiliar topics. Over the last sixteen years, the encyclopedia has grown to over forty million articles spanning over 280 languages (including over five million articles in English).[1] Consistently ranking as one of the most popular sites on the web, Wikipedia is also a global community where anyone can contribute and help improve free access to knowledge. In addition to the encyclopedia, the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation supports other community-built content projects including a multilingual dictionary (Wiktionary), global travel guide (Wikivoyage), image and media collection (Wikimedia Commons) and structured data repository (WikiData).[2]

While the most popular Wikipedia articles relate to people and entertainment,[3] Wikipedia has broad topical coverage and is widely used by students and researchers to investigate academic topics. Several studies have shown that undergraduate students turn to Wikipedia, usually via a search engine, for help getting started with their research and as a source of background information. While these students often perceive Wikipedia as being of lower quality and less credible, they value its convenience and ease of use compared to library resources.[4] Wikipedia is also used by faculty in preparation for teaching, and in research.[5] Wikipedia has grown both as a topic of research itself and as a cited source[6] and Wikipedia use is also appearing in professional fields, such as law and medicine.[7]

People contribute to Wikipedia for different reasons, including that they: find it fun, like to learn, support open access to information, and because they possess altruism that drives them to contribute to a resource for the greater good.[8] A lack of contribution from academia has been attributed to misconceptions (e.g. belief that Wikipedia is for profit), differences in

knowledge production processes (e.g. Wikipedia can be more collaborative, anti-elitist, and anonymous than academia), and peer-culture (e.g. lack of time and institutional support).[9] However, there have also been calls to contribute to Wikipedia as a professional responsibility across disciplinary communities.[10] Among librarians, perceptions of Wikipedia have been mixed. Like other users, librarians take advantage of its convenience to gather background or get started in areas that are unfamiliar, but they do not widely recommend it to their users or include it as source in library instruction.[11]

In considering the interests and strengths of libraries and Wikipedia there is natural synergy to build connections and foster collaboration between these entities. In addition to content paralleling reference materials that have historically been found and used in libraries, Wikimedia Foundation's vision of "a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge,"[12] rings in harmony with the goals of many libraries and librarians. To help support these connections, this article identifies resources and provides examples for designing library efforts to collaborate with the Wikipedia community in exposing resources, teaching information literacy skills, and building new engagement within and across communities.

Wikipedia Core Principles and Guideline Considerations

In designing library programs that incorporate Wikipedia or related Wikimedia projects, it is important to recognize that Wikipedia is a global community working to provide access to free, high quality information and with this come standards and expectations.[13] Contributors, also known as Wikipedians, agree to license their work such that it can be reused and remixed and all contributions are recorded for perpetuity in page histories. And as one would expect from an encyclopedia, articles are expected to cite reliable outside sources that can be

verified rather than present original research or personal interpretation. In addition, the community strives for a neutral point of view that fairly and impartially represents different perspectives without bias. High quality tutorials, including an interactive Wikipedia Adventure,[14] are available to help people familiarize themselves with the community and get started.[15]

While it is possible to edit Wikipedia without an account, simply linking edits to an IP address, creating an account helps users connect and engage with the community. Accounts allow users to unify their contributions and also includes benefits like a watchlist for monitoring pages of interest, a user page that can be used to share interests, a sandbox to practice editing, a user talk page for communicating with other editors, as well as access to customizations and more specialized editing tools.[16] Accounts are intended for individuals rather than groups and one can choose whether to edit under a real name or pseudonym while avoiding user names that imply a group identity. As a librarian participating in projects associated with their library it is helpful to disclose this relationship, explain how your efforts seek to enrich Wikipedia, and invite input from the community.[17]

Resources to Foster Connections and Collaboration

Community is a particular strength of Wikipedia and there are many collaborative spaces and mechanisms to get support from other contributors. At the most basic level each Wikipedia article has a talk page where users may discuss content, suggest additional resources, and work to resolve disputes. A few additional community areas of particular interest to the development of library projects include:

- The Wikipedia Library, which helps to promote discovery, access, use, and citation of reliable sources to improve Wikipedia.[18] The project provides guidance for

libraries interested in contributing to Wikipedia and has established a program for Wikipedia Library Interns. The project has also established partnerships with major publishers to provide free access to commercial databases and journal packages to select Wikipedians. The project also produces a bimonthly newsletter.

- GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) Wiki, which is a group organized around engaging cultural heritage organizations in projects to open access to knowledge.[19] The group provides a rich collection of resources and case studies that provide inspiration and guidance for organizing different types of projects that incorporate the use of Wikimedia platforms. This group has a mailing list and produces a monthly newsletter highlighting new and ongoing projects. In addition, the group helps connect cultural heritage organizations to experienced Wikipedians.

- WikiProjects, such as WikiProject Libraries, are groups of people working around specific topics or processes.[20] WikiProject groups provide places to identify and get support from others with similar interests. In addition to providing suggestions for working in a particular topical area, these projects often engage in article assessment and suggest articles that need improvement or creation.

- The Wiki Education Foundation (Wiki Ed), which is a non-profit organization that works to connect Wikipedia and higher education in the United States and Canada.[21] The organization provides resources to support both students and instructors, including guidance on designing assignments and a dashboard to manage assignments and track student work.

- Grants to support a wide-range of activities that align with the Wikimedia Foundation mission, which are available to members of the community. Even if not interested in applying for funding, the IdeaLab can be a place to share ideas and find collaborators to engage in Wikimedia

projects.[22] Similarly, the Evaluation Portal provides strategies and tools one can use to assess library-Wikipedia projects.[23] Reviewing current and past grant applications may also provide inspiration.

Wikipedians have also developed tools to help assess content and make it easier to identify areas that need development or other targeted engagement efforts. A few helpful tools include:

- Assessment templates, which can be used by the community to categorize articles based on importance and quality.[24] These templates are often used alongside topical WikiProjects. Articles that have been identified as Good and Featured Articles can serve as exemplars when getting started with articles in similar topic areas and importance rankings can be used to prioritize efforts.

- Wikimedia Statistics, which provides data related to Wikipedia content and use.[25] These data can be used to find out more about how pages are accessed and to identify highly accessed topics in need of improvement. Information about individual Wikipedia articles can be obtained through the Pageviews tool; these data can also be accessed from the Page Information link under Tools in the menu to the left of each article.[26]

- Meetup pages, which can be used to organize Wikipedia events. These pages can help identify or promote in-person opportunities to work with other Wikipedians.[27]

- Programs & Events Dashboard, which is a tool to capture metrics associated with specific events or programs. This can be used to capture and report data that indicate impact, such as how many people participated in an event, how much content was added, and how many people read this content.[28]

Examples of Library Engagement

Content and Collections

Creating connections to library collections on Wikipedia can help to improve discovery and access, and numerous libraries have embarked on efforts to make library resources more visible in this widely used reference source. By highlighting library resources in Wikipedia articles, organizations like the University of Washington, Syracuse University, University of Houston, Ball State University and University of Pittsburg have demonstrated increases in web traffic.[29] Sara Snyder from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art also noted making connections with people, such as archive donors and their families, through her edits,[30] and Galloway and DellaCorte noted a correlated increase in e-mail reference inquiries.[31] Using contribution templates, such as those used by the Archives of American Art, can help to collect articles that have been touched by library efforts.[32] This can be particularly helpful if the project spans multiple contributors.

While it is relatively easy to pepper Wikipedia with links to library resources, these efforts should seek to improve Wikipedia rather than promote the library. The goal should not be to list every possible source, but rather to identify what will provide the most benefit to new or unfamiliar researchers while keeping neutrality in mind and recognizing that key sources may be associated with other organizations. Links that are redundant or not highly relevant are likely to be identified as spam and removed, wasting energy from both library participants and others in the Wikipedia community. Using persistent URLs or identifiers to link resources whenever possible can help to ensure that resources will be available even when local website architecture changes. In addition to links to library collections, one might provide further reading that highlights key reference sources or seminal works on the topic.

In comparing Wikipedia and library content, one will likely identify articles that need addi-tional information or corrections. Actively working to improve these pages, rather than just linking to outside resources helps to demonstrate overarching commitment to improve Wikipedia. When working with primary source collections, it is important to remember that Wikipedia has a policy against original research. Rather than citing primary sources directly, it is often necessary to seek reliable interpretations of the data they contain, such as scholarly publications that make use of these resources or archival finding aids. As suggested by Galloway and DellaCorte libraries might also review Wikipedia content as a part of the procedure for processing new collections.[33]

It is also possible for libraries to donate digitized media content to the Wikimedia Commons, the image and media source for Wikipedia articles, when copyright and policies allow. Adding materials to the Commons makes them available for use in Wikimedia projects and elsewhere, and metadata associated with the upload points back to the original library source and may drive traffic to related resources. Donating materials to the Commons, rather than linking these sources, promotes greater availability of freely licensed educational content, avoids content inaccessibility associated with changing links or exceeding organization server capacity, and promotes formats compatible with efforts to provide access on mobile devices and low-bandwidth connections.[34]

Outreach and Engagement

Going beyond simply editing Wikipedia in isolation, many library efforts to add content have also worked to engage their community and utilize the expertise of existing Wikipedians. Even without extensive or highly specialized collections, libraries and their staff can facilitate better understanding and appreciation of Wikipedia through outreach. From working with an individual scholar to hosting a workshop or editing event to supporting global initiatives, library-

Wikipedia partnerships can help users to better appreciate and utilize both entities.

In an effort to acquire assistance with outreach and develop partnerships within Wikipedia and the Wikimedia community, libraries may wish to seek a Wikipedian-in-Residence (or Wikimedian-in-Residence).[35] Working through paid, for academic credit, or volunteer opportunities these individuals serve as a liaison between Wikimedia and a host organization. They work with organizational staff, the community, and Wikipedia to coordinate efforts and strengthen connections. Libraries which have sponsored Wikipedians-in-Residence include the British Library, the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum, and the National Library of Scotland.[36] Libraries might also work with Wikipedia Visiting Scholars to sponsor a Wikipedian to use library materials to improve content of mutual interest[37] or offer an internship program that engages students in Wikipedia projects while they develop professional experience. [38]

Libraries, often through partnerships with active and experienced editors, have hosted events and educational workshops. These gatherings can be a way to bring people together in a library space to engage in research and discovery. Workshops offered in libraries help staff or the general public learn more about using this tool in different contexts. Depending on expertise and interests, these events might range from a basic orientation to Wikipedia, introducing how Wikipedia works or using Wikipedia to get started with research, to more specialized sessions on how to teach with Wikipedia or the process for adding images to the Commons. Events might also include a presenter to highlight local research or projects using Wikipedia or provide a forum for discussing broader issues related to open content and collaboration. For example, libraries have held events in conjunction with Open Access Week.[39]

Training may also be part of an editing event (also known as an edit-a-thon). These events often center on selected themes and might serve as an opportunity to introduce community members to Wikipedia editing and specific library resources or collections.[40] Libraries can help by leveraging their social networks for publicity and providing internet connectivity, computers, snacks, or childcare, in addition to their expertise with information. Libraries also participate in larger multi-site events like Art+Feminism or #1Lib1Ref.[41] Working with a larger initiative may bring targeted support, training, and marketing that make it easier to get started.

Information Literacy and Instruction

Wikipedia also provides opportunities to teach literacy skills and engage students in research. Students have been recognized for their desire to engage in work that makes a difference and are often enthusiastic about contributing to a project that provides highly visible access to their work.[42] Assignments that involve Wikipedia editing can be used to increase student motivation and make research fun.[43] Practitioners report that these assignments can be used to help students build a wide range of skills, including: search and evaluation, digital literacy, writing, collaboration, peer-review, copyright and related practices, project management, and critical thinking.[44] Students themselves have identified benefits that include learning to communicate technical topics to general audiences, collaborate with others, and identify appropriate sources.[45] Using Wikipedia as a teaching tool can also be mapped to educational objectives including those associated with information literacy.[46]

Wikipedia assignments can be designed to accommodate many different subjects, scales of instruction, and timeframes. Course-long projects, often replacing a more traditional term paper, might ask students to write or significantly improve an existing article related to class material. Art and media classes might encourage students

to illustrate articles, while language classes include exercises in translating content.[47] Courses might also utilize shorter assignments or exercises like copyediting, evaluating articles, searching for and correcting plagiarism, or finding and adding citations to unsourced claims to tackle more specific objectives.[48]

Even in ordinary information literacy instruction settings, librarians can use Wikipedia to help students develop search strategies and learn about information formats. While many students have already identified Wikipedia as a tool to get started with their research, librarians can legitimize this practice while introducing techniques that are transferable to other resources, such as selecting keywords and using citations to find additional sources.[49] Introducing students to the history and talk pages can demonstrate the dynamic nature of research writing and give students perspective into the complexity of knowledge construction.[50] Asking students to compare Wikipedia articles to other formats, such as journal articles and news stories on the same topic, can help students articulate how different formats are written for different audiences, are developed in different ways, and serve different purposes.

Librarians may work with course instructors to design Wikipedia assignments to meet learning objectives and facilitate library instruction that meets students' needs, which might include aspects of topic selection, information searching, source evaluation, plagiarism, and citing sources. Librarians can also assist students as they connect with the Wikipedia community, begin to understand community culture and philosophy, and develop skills to use feedback from diffuse perspectives. Entering a more interactive teaching role, they can review students' articles, recognize students' effort and achievement, or nominate articles for the Did You Know portion of Wikipedia.[51]

For librarians that do not have opportunities to teach courses of their own or have not been approached for this type of instruction, they may consider leveraging calls from within their professional organizations, like the American Psychological Association, American Historical Association, and the Institution of Civil Engineers, to foster interest.[52] As suggested by Oliver, librarians might also seek to make connections with faculty who already use Wikipedia in their teaching or scholarship or offer mock-classroom workshops for faculty to experience how Wikipedia could be used in their courses.[53]

Conclusions

As the landscape of knowledge and information has evolved, Wikipedia has been viewed by some as competition to libraries. However, embracing Wikipedia provides libraries with new opportunities to connect people with information. Working with Wikipedia and experienced Wikipedians supports efforts to improve discovery and access to information, build relationships within and across our communities, and promote information literacy skill development. Inviting members of the community to work with libraries and Wikipedia provides improved exposure of knowledge from across perspectives and opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate and recognize value in the curation of information.

Libraries do not have to engage in large scale projects to make a difference. As Wikipedia has demonstrated, many people coming together to make small contributions can produce amazing results. Given scale and complexity, getting started with Wikipedia and other Wikimedia projects can at times be intimidating, but as illustrated in this article many resources are available to help interested libraries become more involved. Working with Wikipedia is a simple beginning to fostering a campus culture that encourages knowledge sharing and improved access to scholarship. These efforts may provide

inspiration for future collaborations as academic libraries seek to boldly lead participation in new forms of collaboration, public scholarship, and community engagement.

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