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What we can learn from Wikipedia: Why we should jump on board

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Abstract

Wikipedia is a proven model for openly and effectively creating and distributing high quality information in a way that users can easily access it. Its success provides lessons for the library profession to learn and challenges some of our assumptions about how we might address the mission of providing free and open access to everyone. Wikipedia is a platform for librarians to put their professional skills to work adding content and improving the quality of the entries while addressing the gender imbalance of the male-dominated group of contributors that are currently doing this work.

Keywords

Wikipedia, open access, free information, structured data, Web, mission of libraries

Technology Matters

What We Can Learn from Wikipedia: Why We Should Jump Onboard

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In an effort to fight conspiracy theories from propagating uncontested on YouTube, Susan Wojcicki, YouTube CEO, announced that conspiracy videos would be accompanied by "information cues" to provide an alternate viewpoint. The announcement came during a panel at South by Southwest on March 20th, 2018.

The authoritative resource that would be called upon to both define conspiracy theories and provide the alternative viewpoint on those theories would be Wikipedia.[1] The announcement was a surprise to the folks at Wikipedia.

Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org) describes itself as "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit." It is one project in a larger Wikimedia movement that supports free, open-content, wiki-based Internet projects. These projects are supported by the Wikimedia Foundation, which was founded in 2003 "…to empower and engage people around the world to collect and develop educational content under a free license or in the public domain, and to disseminate it effectively and globally."[2]

Articles can be contributed and edited anonymously and though there are policies and guidelines, there are no formal requirements about who can edit what.

The five fundamental principles (pillars) under which Wikipedia operates are:

1. Wikipedia is an encyclopedia
2. Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view
3. Wikipedia is free content that anyone can use, edit, and distribute
4. Wikipedia's editors should treat each other with respect and civility
5. Wikipedia has no firm rules

Wikipedia content is a product of the effort of "hundreds of thousands of people" who write, improve, and update articles in an effort to keep it "neutral and supported by reliable resources."[3] It is overwhelmingly made up of volunteer editors with a smaller cadre of volunteers who have some additional editorial authority. That authority is derived from the Wikipedia community itself as opposed to being handed down from above.

The fact that YouTube, a multi-billion dollar company, is turning to a volunteer-based, open content wiki that anyone can edit, to provide authoritative information to its customers suggests that Wikipedia is doing something right. And the fact that no representative from Wikipedia (or any of the Wikimedia projects) has been called in testify before Congress reinforces the belief that Wikimedia has found a way to deliver reliable, fact-based, content to its users – unlike Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms.

So, what is Wikipedia doing right that libraries might learn from? And why aren't librarians more involved as editors?

These two questions are linked. I believe that there are lessons to be learned, and these lessons point to the need for librarians to get involved.

Wikipedia Lesson 1: Make it easy to find a good answer.

Now that people can use regular language to find answers from Siri and Alexa and Google, they no longer need librarians to act as intermediaries for much of the information they are seeking.[4] They may find lots of wrong answers, but increasingly, they are able to find a good answer via a simple search because Wikipedia often turns up high among the search results, thereby increasing one's chance of choosing a useful and factual answer among the possible choices.

Wikipedia Lesson 2: Structure the data so it is easy to use.

Wikipedia works with Wikidata (another Wikimedia project) to provide data that is structured in a way that search engines understand and can put to use. It ensures that Wikipedia entries display in a user-friendly way. Instead of just another entry in the search results list, Wikipedia results often appear in a special box at the top of Google's search results. These "rich snippets" are a function of structured data. Using structured data and modern Internet technologies ensures that search engines can display Wikipedia content in such a way that people can quickly get the answer to their question. According to Katherine Maher, executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation, Wikidata is used to organize datasets from the Library of Congress and others, and it powers hundreds of semantic web services and knowledge graphs, including those maintained by Google, Apple, and Yahoo![5] In other words, Wikipedia creates structured data from its own Wikipedia content and also structures data from other content providers.

Wikipedia Lesson 3: Good content can be free.

I'm thinking about databases. We contribute to an industry that keeps high quality content locked behind expensive and difficult-to-use portals. Meanwhile, excellent content is available from Open Access sources and even more good content would end up there if we threw more of our support behind Open Access and stopped paying subscriptions that keep libraries dependent on database aggregators for continued access. Publishing high quality content can be expensive. But, what we have learned from Wikipedia is that there are plenty of people who are capable of delivering high quality content that isn't expensive and we should be taking advantage of that fact. Wikipedia is an excellent resource complete with references and oversight. It isn't perfect but it's an incredibly good start at providing high quality, free, easy-to-find information.

Wikipedia Lesson 4: Playing in someone else's sandbox can be a good thing.

Wikipedia built their platform on the Internet and utilized simple technologies to get the job done. It doesn't get much simpler than a wiki when it comes to editing content and structure online. Instead of deciding they needed to create their own custom database or content management system, they just went all in with commodity Internet software to get the job done. In doing that, they've ensured their content will continue to take advantage of evolving web-based technologies.

Wikipedia Lesson 5: People can be trusted to do the right thing.

The fact that Wikipedia has operated for 15 years and still relies on volunteers to add articles, dig up new references, fact-check, and add to this free knowledgebase is pretty amazing. The model has shown that people do care about accuracy, that the truth does still matter, and that regular people will commit their time to doing something about it.

Over the years, Wikipedia has struggled with editor diversity. A very large percentage of the editors are men (90% in 2013[6] down to 85% in 2017 after a concerted effort to change that) and editors are also mostly from North America and

Europe[7] (makes me think of how we ended up with the Dewey Decimal System).

This brings me to my second question. Why aren't more librarians involved in Wikipedia. Or perhaps a better question is why hasn't the library profession jumped on board and seen Wikipedia as the low hanging fruit for getting high-quality, free, and accurate content to our users?

I think that some librarians look down on Wikipedia for some of the very reasons that it is successful. The fact that anyone can contribute immediately flags Wikipedia as lacking in authoritative value. The fact that it is a secondary source instead of a primary source diminishes its perceived value even though you can access many of the primary sources by following the provided links and citations. The fact that it competes with the materials we've spent so much time selecting and paying for and making available to our users means they must be better than the free stuff on the web, right?

But we shouldn't see ourselves in competition with Wikipedia. Instead, we should be leveraging the Wikimedia platform and supporting the development of Wikipedia as a valuable resource for our users. We should be all over the attempt to diversify the community of editors. In a profession that is over 80% women, we could balance the gender diversity at Wikipedia in no time.

The better Wikipedia is, the easier it is for our patrons to get the answers they need whether they are on their home computers, in the library, or on their smartphones. The content is free, easy to access, and easy to use. A librarian dream come true!

There are librarians involved in Wikipedia.[8] Jessamyn West has been involved with Wikipedia since 2004, serving part of that time on the Wikimedia Foundation's Advisory Board[9] as well as consulting on the #1lib1ref project,[10] a project designed to attract more librarians.[11] She still works as a Wikipedia editor. In fact, she helped me out just the other day with some edits I was doing. Merrilee Proffitt (now of OCLC) is helping too. She organized a Conversation Starter at ALA Annual (New Orleans) entitled "Leveraging Wikipedia to help enrich and improve library practices."

I have also encouraged participation by librarians in Wikipedia over the years. I'll share the story if you don't mind a short rant…. I was working with the PLA Tech Committee, which used to be responsible for the Tech Notes. These short web-based papers provided useful, easily digestible information about new technologies. The audience was librarians, but many of the technologies covered are used in multiple industries. Many of the Tech Notes predate Wikipedia, but at some point, Wikipedia was alive and well and I suggested to the committee that we update Wikipedia entries – updating the entry and adding a section on how the technologies were employed in libraries -- instead of creating a Tech Note that would have limited readership. I felt it would be better to improve the Wikipedia entry about that technology and provide good information to everyone than to write a costly Tech Note that was focused on library use of said technology. My idea was rejected because contributing to Wikipedia wouldn't show up as a PLA membership benefit.

Shortly thereafter, the committee stopped producing PLA Tech Notes and the archives now live on the ALA site.[12] They are old and outdated and aren't very useful anymore. Had they lived on Wikipedia, they might have been kept up-to-date by one of the tens of thousands of Wikipedia editors out there – some of whom might have been library technology consultants like me. I can't update Tech Notes, but I could have updated Wikipedia entries.

The success of Wikipedia is full of lessons for a profession committed to free, equal access to high quality information. It is also a platform just waiting for us to jump on board and start applying our excellent skills to improve it. I urge you to give it a try. Pick a topic you know something about, look it up, and improve the entry. You will be surprised at how gratifying it is to take this kind of direct action.

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