

The Devil's Advocate: Librarians in Wikipedia

In the 1930s H. G. Wells envisioned a new, free, synthetic, authoritative, permanent “World Encyclopedia” that could help World Citizens make the best use of universal information resources. He called his vision “a sort of mental clearing house for the mind, a depot where knowledge and ideas are received, sorted, summarized, digested, clarified and compared” (Wells & Mayne, 1938). Wells dubbed his proposed resource the World Brain. His idea did not go without notice. Arthur C. Clarke, in his 1962 book *Profiles of the Future*, predicted that the construction of this World Brain would begin to take place by the year 2000 (Clark, 1962). On January 15, 2001, Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger formally launched Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia. Welcome to the World Brain! Enter librarians, stage left!

Wikipedia is often a sensitive and controversial topic when discussed within the realm of Librarians and other Information Professionals both within and outside the environment of Academia. The fact that the source can be edited

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in an open access manner by any individual gives rise to the claim that the Information contained within the resource is inaccurate and that efforts regarding the website are to be treated as outside the scope of professional development for scholars of all kinds. There are, however other factors to consider and steps which Librarians, especially, can take to alter this situation while improving and utilizing a widely-known, heavily used, currently self-administrated source of global Information.

A primary fact to remember is that Wikipedia is not *Academia's* knowledge, it is *The World's* knowledge. Information contained within the online encyclopedia covers an expanse that reaches into more modern-day topics, hot button issues, pop culture, and everyday life than peer-reviewed academic databases and journal articles. For instance, should an individual within or outside the walls of a University or College seek Information regarding the video game *HALO*, (a very famous sci-fi style first-person player), one would be quite hard-pressed to locate material that covers in-depth details of the game in an academic resource. Wikipedia, in contrast has a great deal of content regarding the game including production credits, financial returns, plot summaries, public reactions, and development details. Should a Student of any kind, however be attempting to write a paper, on say: whether video games have reached a level of production to be considered on equal footing as fiction literature, motion pictures, or major music recordings getting information regarding such a video game can be incredibly handy for arguing the case academically. Again, however there exists a dearth of Information on specific games inside traditional Academic environments.

An important element to remember when dealing with Librarianship is that the people being served are Patrons, not Customers. *Customers* are individuals utilized by a business entity for the purpose of revenue generation while *Patrons* are individuals who utilize educational resources as an investment in themselves. A *Customer* is a means to an end but a *Patron* IS the end while the resources and most importantly the *services* are the means. Anyone who uses an Information resource or service has the potential of becoming a Patron for a Librarian as the user is merely a Patron to whom the Librarian has not yet reached out. Another crucial part of the Librarianship Field is keeping in mind the idea that if all has been done properly, Patrons will not know that Librarians have done anything at all. This, of course is a bitter pill to swallow when regulations of budget allocation for educational services and resources are based on quantifiable output resulting in performance-based funding. It must also be considered, however that users of other Information resources do not take into account the process of Information acquisition when utilizing a particular source: web surfers do not tend to sit in awe of the algorithms that run a Google search. They type in a word or phrase and expect to get a desired result and as long as this happens no fuss is made. It is only when a resource does not work as expected that a person calls attention to it.

Turning this idea to Wikipedia it serves Librarians well to remember that Patrons will use this website regardless of what Information Professionals say, think, or do. It is large, well known, comprehensive, easy to navigate, requires minimal control vocabulary input, and a resource which despite claims of a lack of validity does have a very active reviewer presence and requires editors to state their sources.

Librarians have also struggled over the years with problems of outreach, as in how to find the Patrons yet to be contacted in order to direct them to credible sources and instructional services offered by their Public, Academic, and Special Libraries. The fact is, however that where Patrons are is very well known: they are on Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, Reddit, Instagram, IMGUR, YouTube, etc., and it is merely the effort of a Librarian presence which is lacking within these areas.

The claim that Wikipedia is unreliable due to the fact that the website can be edited by *anyone* is also one which is skewed. The resource does not contain its inaccuracies due to the fact that anyone can post to it but primarily because the *correct* people do not, or at least not in sufficient quantities. This offers a great opportunity for Librarians to utilize their special skills as expert researchers in order to validate, correct, build-up, and fill in gaps within articles as well as create new, well researched articles on topics yet to be covered. Of course, the benefit of such activity is that Librarians would not need to create any framework or administrator properties within Wikipedia itself because the resource is already in existence, it is already open for editing access, and it is already monitored. The last point is very noteworthy as it must be advocated that if Librarians are to increase their presence in the editing environment of Wikipedia it must be done so with the clear statement that the intention is not to take over the editing power and that the work is not in the vein to make Wikipedia an elitist, Academic source but rather to utilize the same editing access that all users enjoy to add credible material using the specialized skillset which Librarians possess alongside the already existing open access editors. The aspect to recall is the fact that Librarians are not experts on every subject, but simply at their core are expert researchers.

One such expert librarian that I must mention, and without whom would not be at involved in Wikipedia, is Dr. Kathleen de la Peña McCook, a Distinguished University Professor at the University of South Florida (USF), School of Information. By the fall of 2014 she had integrated Wikipedia editing into the coursework for some of her classes. As one of her students, I was hooked almost immediately. Her goal for this is to increase librarian participation in the online resource. This encyclopedia that “anyone can edit” has been proven to be nearly as accurate as *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Giles, 2005), but there is, of course, room for improvement. And who else is better suited for that task than Librarians! But although there are currently 27,484,517 editors in Wikipedia English, only 318 are self-described Librarians (Wikipedia, 2016).

And there are other people missing from this pool of content creators, women. According to the Wikimedia Foundation (2011) only 9% of Wikipedia editors are female. This online resource can never meet founder Jimmy Wales' goal of encompassing all of human knowledge with this current composition of editors.

Not only has research shown that most Wikipedia editors are male, we also know that most of these editors are from North America and Europe. Although an ideal way to address this imbalance would be to recruit from the Global East and South, an effective alternative can be to recruit participants via a series of edit-a-thons held at college campuses. Here we can gather information professionals, including library students. Because the makeup of student bodies at college campuses are roughly 60% female (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), with the percentage of library students who are female even higher (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), we have a strong likelihood of gathering a majority of females for these events. College campuses in North America offer a diverse student and faculty population, many of whom are from countries outside of the United States. Therefore we have a reasonable chance to have for our edit-a-thons an ethnically/nationally diverse set of participants.

To help address these issues in our own small way we started hosting edit-a-thons in the fall of 2014. By the time this article is published I will have hosted the third such event here at USF. All Information Professionals are welcome to join us, in person or remotely, by using Google Hangouts. Although there are several edit-a-thons that address Wikipedia's lack of female editors, our events are the only ones I know of that also seek to recruit and retain Librarians and female editors. We believe that these events can create a situation where participants enjoy the editing experience, are supported by their co-editors, and are inspired to continue contributing to this "World Brain." We will build relationships with Library Science communities, and the new editors will learn from and connect with each other.

So what do the editors at our edit-a-thons do? Although our demographics are quite unique in the universe of Wikipedia projects, in practice we are a microcosm of the Wikipedian community at large in that we create new articles, expand existing articles, research, copy edit, add references, revert vandalism, upload images, add links, et cetera. What sets us apart is that we approach this with a highly developed skill set uniquely suited for this task. We do this with a selfless idealism, one that attracts us to this profession, is further instilled in us as students in our field, and one that should naturally lead us to make Wikipedia even better. Furthermore, we believe that edit-a-thons are only a first step, as librarians and information professionals, in this endeavor.

The great disadvantage to Wikipedia when attempting to recruit Librarians, Information Professionals, and other Scholars to participate in editing pages

is the fact that the perception of Wikipedia as an inaccurate resource does not lend itself to the professional development of those who work for institutions of education. Essentially, if a person works for a Library or University/College it is unlikely that they will get acknowledgements from their peers as having accomplished professional level work and most certainly not contract-extension nor promotion-worthy recognition. If the number of scholars editing within the website could be raised then the level of reliability within the resource could be raised in turn. If the level of reliability could be raised, then the level of recognition of scholars participating within the open editing process would be more professionally regarded. If the work could be more professionally regarded then the number of scholars willing to participate could also be raised as a result, thus continuing the process of reliability and recognition.

To this end this article's authors would like to propose the creation of an official consortium of Wikipedia Librarian editors. In theory the initial attempt at such a group would be within the Tampa Bay region of Florida where the authors currently live, but there is no reason why such a concept should have to be geographically limited to such an area as a rule. The concept is to have Librarians of as many backgrounds as possible form an organization, (or at least a loose confederation), of individuals who would be willing to edit Wikipedia on a regular basis and remain in contact with one another frequently to keep abreast of progress, questions, and pitfalls. Such a group is in the brainstorming process at the moment but is hoped to reach out to already existing organizations, should any become known to the authors, both within the Librarianship and Wikipedia circles and would continue to grow to seek recognition as an official professional development organization by local, state, or national accrediting bodies. With this goal in mind and the progress already laid out by likeminded individuals and groups, it is these authors' conclusion that it would be possible to take on the goal of fortifying the existing Information world!

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