Few online resources provoke as much controversy in the library community as Wikipedia. Some librarians hate it, arguing that since anyone can edit it, it can't be trusted. Others love it, because it is fast, easy to use, and a good starting point for research. With such a conflicted relationship, there's no clear answer as to where (or whether) Wikipedia belongs in libraries. We librarians are not sure what we should do with it.

In the March/April 2008 issue of ONLINE, William Badke wondered about, in his InfoLit Land column, "What to Do With Wikipedia" (www.infotoday.com/online/mar08/Badke.shtml). The column describes how this online encyclopedia is snubbed by academia but widely accepted by many others as a valid place to find information. He proposes that academia should participate in Wikipedia and makes several suggestions as to how professors and their students could improve Wikipedia by contributing new scholarly content, evaluating existing articles, and editing those that are less than scholarly. Badke's article fails to mention one academic group that could positively impact the content and scholarship in Wikipedia—librarians.

Based on work done at the University of Washington by Ann M. Lally and Carolyn E. Dunford, described in their May/June 2007 D-Lib Magazine article "Using Wikipedia to Extend Digital Collections" (www.dlib.org/dlib/may07/lally/05lally.html), librarians at Wake Forest University began experimenting with Wikipedia as a platform for sharing and expanding our web presence in relation to our digital collections. Although we agreed that there were many reasons to begin this project, we encountered a few roadblocks.
Through trial and error we have learned strategies for how librarians can effectively use Wikipedia to make their collections known on the web. We feel the dissemination of this information could be useful for the larger library and information management community.

WHY LIBRARIANS SHOULD CONTRIBUTE

People access library websites less frequently now than in the past. Lally and Dunford note this trend, pointing to a 2006 MIT study on user needs assessment (http://macfadden.mit.edu/webgroup/userneeds/userneeds-report.pdf). A March 29, 2008, OCLC webinar about its new service, WorldCat Local, discussed this trend as well.

A possible explanation for the decline is that people do not find libraries’ websites to be content rich. Instead, they look for discovery tools that instantly deliver information about desired topics in a user-friendly environment. Wikipedia entries provide that instant information on numerous topics (although some information may be sketchy or completely inaccurate). Graphics, internal links to related entries, external links to related websites, and references to other information sources are some of the features found in many Wikipedia entries. The same cannot be said for many library catalogs; they either do not contain, or are incapable of providing, these extra features. If librarians could contribute to Wikipedia, it might raise awareness of the library.

The presence of librarians in Wikipedia as content contributors would assist with the creation and maintenance of a more scholarly environment. Their involvement could change academicians’ minds about Wikipedia. What is currently shunned by many in academia as a flawed information resource would become regarded as a good place to begin their research.

Increasingly, people don’t use physical libraries. They may be unable to visit the building, for various reasons, or feel everything they need to know and learn can be found on the internet. Librarians, as well as many others, realize that there is much inaccurate information on the web. Factual and accurate information is highly valued by librarians, who excel at efficiently finding, utilizing, and citing respected, peer-reviewed information sources. They are vigilant in providing all patrons with such information. Thus, librarian-created entries in Wikipedia could assist in alleviating misinformation. When following an external link to a library’s website, nonlibrary users may want to explore their local libraries to discover what other valuable information and resources can be found.

Many large academic and research public libraries house special collections. The trend in recent years is to digitize these materials whenever possible. Because many individuals are no longer frequenting libraries’ websites, these digitized collections remain unknown, underutilized, or inaccessible. Individual entries about these collections, or external links to the collections added to entries already within Wikipedia, could bolster Wikipedia’s reputation and help it shed its less-than-scholarly image. Scholarly use of these specialized collections will increase through public awareness of their existence due to Wikipedia.

JUMPING INTO EDITING

The library staff at the Z. Smith Reynolds Library has a history of early adoption of Web 2.0 tools. In this spirit, the Information Technology Team suggested that we contribute to Wikipedia. We knew that this would broaden access to the Z. Smith Reynolds Library’s digital collections, since we planned to create entries in our areas of expertise and add external links to existing articles in Wikipedia. We enthusiastically created a user account in Wikipedia and began with the creation of two entries: one for Ronald Watkins, a renowned Shakespearean scholar, and one for the library’s collection of Duke Tobacco Co. cigarette cards. In addition, we placed an external link to the existing Cigarette Cards entry in Wikipedia.

The following day, we went to Wikipedia to check on our entries and were startled to find that only the Ronald Watkins page still existed. In addition to this surprise, we found our account was no longer active. Baffled as to what had happened, we researched possible causes of the problem. We found that an editor had blocked our username and deleted the Duke Tobacco Co. page. Through email communication with the editor, we found that he had blocked the account because the name indicated it belonged to an organization rather than an individual. Only individuals can edit Wikipedia. The editor also said that the deleted page could be interpreted as an advertisement for our collection and Wikipedia has strict policies against advertisements within the encyclopedia.

Our communication with the Wikipedia editor helped us reexamine some nuances of the Wikipedia community. Although we were acting as a not-for-profit organization that was interested only in sharing our free information with a larger community, we still needed to be very careful about all of Wikipedia’s policies. The Wikipedia community...
has grown accustomed to criticism from the media and educators. It has responded with guidelines that protect the authority of the resource. Individuals can be held accountable; therefore individuals should be editors instead of organizations. Regardless of the purity of intent, contributors have to be very careful to avoid content that might be perceived as marketing, bias, or a conflict of interest.

Our first endeavor in working with Wikipedia resulted in a less-than-positive outcome. However, our experience resulted in learning about the Wikipedia community’s culture and expectations, plus what it means to be a good Wikipedia contributor and editor. Since then, we have created individual accounts and have focused on adding internal links to related entries and external links to our digitized collections to existing entries in Wikipedia.

OTHER APPROACHES

Although some may have challenging experiences getting started in Wikipedia, there are examples of contribution programs that are going well. Most notable are those at the University of Washington Digital Initiatives (http://tinyurl.com/25qzx), the University of North Texas (http://tinyurl/4ga837), and Villanova University (http://tinyurl.com/4v4lm).

Lally and Dunford report that University of Washington Digital Initiatives librarians are successfully contributing to the encyclopedia without facing the challenges we experienced initially. They have also found that their participation in Wikipedia resulted in a measurable traffic increase to their own website.

The University of North Texas librarians have also contributed to Wikipedia, on topics related to Texas history. Their emphasis is on providing links to specific resources within their collection as supporting evidence to information already found within Wikipedia.

Villanova University employed two graduate students to write entries related to newly digitized materials. As they were creating entries from scratch, the students not only researched the information and wrote entries, but also established links connecting in from related entries and out from the ones they were writing. They cited sources in their research related to their special collections.

WIKIPEDIA’S RULES AND CULTURE

Each of these cases took a different approach in contributing to the encyclopedia. This shows that a library staff member can make successful contributions to the encyclopedia, whether they are merely links back to the collection or complete, original entries. However, as we found in our editing experience, it is useful to have an understanding of the rules and culture of Wikipedia before investing too much time and resources in the project.

Adding Content

Though we often hear that Wikipedia is completely open and anyone can change it, there are a surprising number of rules and guidelines for contributing to the community. To save you time and heartache, this article includes some specific Wikipedia policies and cultural guidelines.

The Do’s and Don’ts of Wikipedia

Wikipedia has specific rules about how to be involved. Some of these have to do with general concepts and some are specific details about syntax and organization. You can learn about syntax and organization by looking at current Wikipedia entries. The following might be helpful with some of the issues that are harder to understand just by looking at existing entries.

• Setting up an account—The first thing you’ll need to do before adding content to Wikipedia is to create an account. Having an account is not required to make edits, but if you would like to contribute original content for your library, a username provides a sense of authority. Wikipedia requires that your account be for a single user, so if there are multiple people within the library adding content, each should have his or her own login. Editors will block shared accounts when they find them.

• Citing your work—as library staff, we appreciate the importance of citations; this is something we have in common with Wikipedia. Whenever adding new content to the encyclopedia, it is important to include citations that point to information that verifies your content.

• Nonmarketing—Adding information about collections, rather than adding information that can be found in collections, can be construed as advertising. If Wikipedia editors believe a contribution is advertising rather than informative, they may delete the content and block the account. It is wise to consider adding content found in a collection and linking to your special collections as a reference, or in the external links section of a given entry.

• Neutral point of view—One of Wikipedia’s most valued standards is the neutral point of view. It is described in detail in the introductory information for new editors, and you can read about its presence, or lack thereof, in the discussion pages for many entries. A neutral point of view is displayed when editors contribute content that does not display bias.

• Verifiability—Wikipedia seeks to contain only verifiable information. The belief that something is most likely true is not enough to merit its inclusion in the encyclopedia. All material must be found in a reputable publication either in print or on the web. The existence of prior publication must be proven in the article with citations and references to the original documents.

• No original research—Wikipedia does not permit original thought or new research to be published in its articles. Wikipedia is a reference resource rather than a platform for new information. All new information must be published in a reliable source before inclusion in Wikipedia.

Tips and Techniques for Inclusion

There are a few tips for contributing to Wikipedia. A first tip that is useful for any project is to create a clear process for contributions. The University of Washington did this, and their process can be found in the Lally and Dunford article.
More Information on Editing

Reasons to Contribute to Wikipedia
• Reverse the trend of decreasing traffic to library websites
• Create a more scholarly environment
• Reach new and potential library users
• Extend special collections

First contributions—It’s recommended that the first few contributions you make to Wikipedia are small. If your edits are simply grammatical or adding supportive evidence, they are likely to remain without being questioned by another editor. This gives you the experience of making positive contributions to the encyclopedia while building up a reputation for making changes that are approved by others.

Finding places to contribute—An easy place to get started is to find existing articles related to your library’s collections. If there are relevant entries you can flesh out the text, add citations from your collection, and, if appropriate, add links back to your site.

If an entry does not exist, you might choose to create a new one. If doing so, it is especially crucial to prove that the topic is notable enough for inclusion and to cite the information in the article. It’s particularly important to be careful when adding new entries. If it is clear that you are affiliated with an organization, the entry might be scrutinized more closely for marketing and advertising, so an objective voice is even more critical.

Familiarize yourself with the Wikipedia culture—Wikipedia has a fairly well-defined culture. Luckily there are resources that can help you understand the big picture. There are many Wikipedia help pages that go into great detail about things such as neutral voice and the role of editors. These pages can help you understand what is expected.

Recently O’Reilly Media published John Broughton’s Wikipedia: The Missing Manual. This resource combines the rules of Wikipedia and the culture of the editors in an easy to use resource. If you are planning to get seriously involved with Wikipedia, read this book.

Monitoring Changes
Once you’ve begun making changes, you’ll probably want to monitor them to see if anyone alters or deletes them. You can do this through an RSS reader, such as Bloglines or Google Reader. If you aren’t using an RSS feed, you can use a built-in feature of Wikipedia: the Watchlist, which allows you to monitor specific pages from within Wikipedia.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS
With our unsuccessful first attempt at Wikipedia, we wondered if there were other places that would welcome the addition of information about libraries’ digitized special collections. We pondered the idea of developing a database in which libraries could enter such information about their collections without the fear of being labeled self-promoting and having their information deleted. External links to the collections would be present, and the database would be searchable by various access points such as subject or keyword, discipline, author, or location.

Not wanting to recreate the wheel, we searched Google and found individual, local and regional, and consortial digitization database efforts. A few examples of the digital collections databases we investigated include Repositories of Primary Sources (www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/OtherRepositories.html), California Digital Library (www.cdlib.org), Digital Collections Online (www.lib.uconn.edu/online/DigitalCollections), OAIster (www.oaister.org), and Digital Library Federation (DLF) Digital Collections Registry (http://dlf.grainger.uiuc.edu/DLFCollectionsRegistry).

TO CONTRIBUTE OR NOT TO CONTRIBUTE
Wikipedia is clearly an important resource for our users. Many start their research on the website and contact the library afterward for more information. Libraries are beginning to take advantage of this user behavior by contributing content to the encyclopedia.

Getting started in this project, though, can be daunting. There are already strong cultural expectations and firm rules in place. Librarians would do well to learn the system and begin their involvement slowly, with small changes in the beginning. We at the Z. Smith Reynolds Library have begun making small edits in Wikipedia with individual accounts. At this time our edits are related to our collections and are helping us learn more about the community and the role we play within it. This informs what we can plan to do in the future, as well.

It is clear that with a little bit of planning and preparation, libraries can begin to impact entries and categories within Wikipedia. Through this type of collaboration, perhaps we will reach a whole new group of users that wouldn’t have come through our doors another way. We may not have resolved the issue of putting Wikipedia in libraries, but we think we’ve found an effective way to put libraries in Wikipedia.

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