Wikipedia, Socialpedia, and Randompedia: How Could I Play by the Rules When There Aren't Any?

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Abstract: This article documents a cataloging librarian's personal narrative that reflects his experience of organizing Wikipedia-Edit-thon. This experience leads to a journey of self-education about Wikipedia, a divergence to preconceived notions about it, and an embrace for a change in the future.

During the summer of 2017, the Center for Teaching, Learning and Educational Technologies (CTLET) at York College, City University of New York (CUNY), sent out an email to the library calling for a volunteer librarian to participate in a Wiki Edit-a-thon and I replied yes immediately. To be honest with you, I had no idea what a Wiki Edit-a-thon actually was, and my Google search (with "thong" as a typo) resulted in some eye-opening results.

I had never thought highly of Wikipedia – in fact, I was Wiki-phobic. As a cataloger, my work is guided by the rules that devote to creating accurate, consistent and authoritative bibliographic information. While in the knowledge base that *anyone* can edit *anything*, I just was not able to convince myself how accuracy, consistency and authoritativeness could be achieved and safeguarded in a ruleless territory. Some one might say, in a sense, Wikipedia is no difference from OCLC, and both employ collective efforts to do better work. It sounds true. Anyone who edits a Wikipedia entry can instantly enthrone himself/herself as a "Wikipedian." However, editing an OCLC record requires authorization that is built on accredited education and/or recognizable work experience. Cataloging is not just a skill that a three-day-trained volunteer can perform (Diao, 2014).

I was afraid that the online encyclopedia that anyone can edit creates a hybrid of "socialpedia" and "randompedia." My noted hybrid resonated in Amanda Filipacchi's essay in *The New York Times* criticizing Wikipedia's problematic editorial practice, which reflects the fact how one individual personality can damage impartiality and egocentric superiority ruins neutrality. It was also echoed in Jaron Lanier's article, "Digital Maoism", that Wikipedia is just one more "online fetish site for foolish collectivism," (Lanier, 2006) in which spontaneity easily beats rationale and intellectual subtlety loses the battle to lunatic imprudence. After I watched Stephen Colbert's satirical skit "Wikiality" and John

Oliver's incitement to vandalize the Wikipedia pages of members of congress, my trust in Wikipedia was almost flushed into the toilet. Through Wikipedia, truth can be conveniently constructed out of sufficient agreedupons and information can be cleverly distorted as a political bayonet.

But I had to do the job that I asked for anyway. On the afternoon of October 11, I dragged myself to a Wiki Translate-a-thon hosted by the English Department of LaGuardia Community College. With some fresh water, cheese and crackers, I registered my first Wikipedia account and created my first Wikipedia entry – a translation of "Baldness" into Chinese. On Sunday morning, November 19, soon after a long trip back from Toronto, I walked to the Wikipedia Asian Month Edit-a-thon at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. A cup of Chardonnay and a piece of a French sandwich immediately dissolved my exhaustion. In an atmosphere that mingled intelligent whispering together with soothing classic Oriental music, I modified a reference for Chinese ritual bronzes and created a Wikipedia entry for a Chinese hand-scroll calligraphy digitized by the museum. On Sunday morning, January 14, 2018, I rushed to the Ace Hotel in Manhattan for Wikipedia Day NYC, a small celebration and participatory conference with keynotes, panel discussions, 5-minute lightning talks and open space sessions. The vegan-feminism cuisine was prepared in a hope of adding balance to the Wikipedia's male-dominated, highly-coded, and sociotechnical culture (Ford & Wajcman, 2017). Of course, eggplants were included, serving as a nice and light topic to start a conversation with other meat-eating Wikipedians. Wiki-energy generated on the field was contagious and I felt I was like "rocking and rolling" in the wave of a crowd at the Woodstock in 1969. I came home with a Wikipedia button pinned on my coat pocket. I was *in*.

My college's Wikipedia Edit-a-thon was scheduled during Black History Month (February) 2018.

I thought I had gained enough experience through those prior Wikipedia events: serve nice food and

drink, listen to some music, and edit/create Wikipedia articles. I was confident that we would hold this

event successfully. We created a very attractive slogan ("Wikipedia: What is Black? What is Missing? And

What We Can Do About It!") on the CTLET department webpage. On the day of the event, we put quite a

few artistically-designed posters on the poles throughout the Academic Core Building. We set up our

computers nicely, displayed our pamphlets beautifully, and did take our food very seriously. We kept

the door wide open, with the expectation that students would walk in and indulge themselves in

creating original entries, revising existing articles or uploading images. However, we didn't attract as

many students as we expected. The number of attendees was fairly modest.

Perhaps it was because students were taught well by the classroom faculty with the perception

that Wikipedia is an unauthoritative source and they didn't want to have anything to do with it.

Perhaps it was because we did not compile a list of well-known African American names that looked

familiar to students so that they would have the strong urge to "create" or "improve" something; or we

could select a few Wikipedia articles which contained obvious errors or abnormities that needed to be

corrected or updated. Or perhaps it was because we didn't pull out any books from the reference

collection that could provide students substantial and helpful materials on the spot. I am sure there

are a lot reasons that we could reflect on why we failed at our first, ice-breaking Wikipedia event.

Understanding why we failed is the best way to reconnect with success. What we were doing was not

only about editing Wikipedia articles, but also about "editing" peoples' mindsets. Could that happen

overnight? Take myself as an example. If I had not been lured by the (admittedly) selfish motive that

participating in the Wiki Edit-a-thon might possibly enhance my resume and help my career growth, I

would be still living in my closed world gnashing my teeth at Wikipedia's multiple flaws and

imperfections. Regardless of the motives, the intent to be "in" took either a daring embrace or a series

of subtle and curious moves.

Participating in Wikipedia events was kind of fun. But the journey of rediscovering Wikipedia

actually began with educating myself with extensive reading after the event. I downloaded and read

more than 50 scholarly articles and a few books on the subject, which helped reshuffle the deck where

my mind had previously been preoccupied by prejudice and fear. After Wikipedia was built, scholars,

librarians and students have been its most common users (Okoli, Mehdi, Mesgari, Nielsen, & Lanamäki,

2014). Wikipedia has frequently been incorporated into one-shot Information Literacy classes or

embedded in the curriculum with other social media platforms to help students develop critical

thinking skills and enhance their awareness of assessing and evaluating the quality of information

(Calhoun, 2014; Kim, Si, & Yoo-Lee, 2014; McClellan, 2016). If I still looked at Wikipedia expecting

authoritative governance, assertive fixity, and absolute specificity as with traditional (print or

electronic) encyclopedias, it would be unrealistic to expect that of a transparent, collaborative, loosely-

organized, and bottom-up information and knowledge base that aims at playing a significant part in

constructing an open and shared global society. When things are determined to be open, it means they

will always be in the negotiation process of accepting the new and the different, and this process will

never stop; but it also means they can't be immune from malicious activities, such as vandalism,

hoaxes, manipulation and abuses. Within Wikipedia, we find both decency and misconduct,

chronologically recorded and piled layer by layer like geological formations; we find that contextual

and circumstantial evidence kept intact as archival provenances; we find the good and the bad; we find the beautiful and the ugly; we find the real; we find life.

It is nothing new that cataloging librarians step out of their comfort zone and undertake public service responsibilities and this working experience accordingly adds different but insightful elements that help enrich their career (Folsom, 2000; Martin, 1995). To facilitate cataloging librarians to attain a smooth transition from behind the scene to the frontline, Folsom offers three useful strategies: getting appropriate training, adjusting communication style, and maintaining a positive attitude. As a cataloging librarian who has been working in the public and instructional services for almost three years, I couldn't agree more with Folsom's profound remarks. In addition to these strategies, my experience of organizing this Wikipedia Edit-a-thon tells me that a willingness to take initiative or walk extra miles is another effective strategy to be added on the guide in an uncharted territory. My preconceived notions about Wikipedia got me accustomed to a shackle that locked my creativity and imagination until my initiative paved my way out of the library and into the fields of experiments. I had excitement and inspiration; I experienced frustration and failure, too. Perhaps it is the frustration and failure that makes one desire for a change. Change could bring one longer and deeper satisfaction. Folsom warns that catalogers should keep users in their mind while working in public services. In September, the college library will embrace an influx of first year students, a cohort of both "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" from high schools (Prenksy, 2001a). To respond to their diverse information needs and different experiences with Wikipedia, I think for this semester I have a much better plan.

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