For the Field

Of the People, For the People: Exploring *Wikipedia* as a Site for Community Building

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need for equal access to factual information about the virus. Free and open sources of information are increasingly important in our digital age. Although *Wikipedia* has often been touted as an unreliable source in the academic context, it can provide a great starting place for those interested in researching a given topic. Additionally, due to its inherently collaborative structure, this could be a site to help build community or extend an existing community, from the physical into the digital.

Through a brief examination of the player/editor created and maintained *Nukapedia*, a wiki-site hosted by Fandom.com and dedicated to the videogame *Fallout 4*, I will demonstrate that a community can be formed even through asynchronous editing projects. I have experienced the power of this game in building community as a long-time fan of this series who has played through three of its titles: *Fallout: New Vegas*, *Fallout 3*, and *Fallout 4*. My long-time partner and I even had out first “official date” on the midnight release of *Fallout 4* at our local *EB Games*. Although I am not an especially talented videogame player, I do enjoy the storylines and aesthetic of its fictional world. These collaborative projects based on collecting, organizing, and sharing knowledge can be employed by library professionals for community programming. As mentioned by Snyder in *Edit-a-thons and Beyond* (2018), organizing “edit-a-thon

events” can be a way to meet institutional goals and even engage with new patrons. These events can aid in building information literacy skills, engaging the community with the library, and acknowledging unique local features and histories.

I will begin with an explanation of *Wikipedia* and how it fosters a collaborative space. This will be followed by an exploration into how the players/editors of videogame wikis, in particular *Nukapedia*, have helped to keep the game alive long past its initial launch. I will then share a short reflection of my own experience contributing to the #1Lib1Ref campaign. Finally, I will propose some wiki-based projects that libraries could adopt to build a sense of community during these times of isolation and beyond.

Wikipedia as a place and a tool

Wikipedia is owned by the Wikimedia Foundation, which seeks to keep knowledge free and “empower and engage people around the world to collect and develop educational content under a free license under the public domain, and to disseminate it effectively and globally” (*About*, 2018). *Wikipedia* began as a supplement to *Nupedia* in 2001, a site striving to collect all knowledge on the Internet (*About*, 2018). While *Nupedia* required articles to be officially reviewed before being made publicly accessible, *Wikipedia* provided a space for knowledge to be quickly disseminated to the masses. As such, it quickly surpassed *Nupedia* in popularity and became a place of collaborative knowledge sharing (Przegalin’ska & Jemielniak, 2018). *Wikipedia* does not rely on a standard review process. Instead, it allows all users to edit and contribute to a single topic. This can be done through “dedicated community pages” where “one can interact with others contributing to [the site], find out what is being worked on and still needs to be added, and collectively decide about the rules by which the encyclopedia is

developed” (Przegalin’ska & Jemielniak, 2018). There are ways to contribute to *Wikipedia* other than editing article content, such as adding citations and correcting formatting errors. This style of encyclopedic website has expanded and been borrowed by other domains and companies. Currently, one can find a wiki-based site on nearly any topic.

Wiki pages were established as a collaborative tool for people to share their knowledge on a given subject. The structure is inherently participatory due to the need for real people to contribute information to the space, provide citations for the information posted, and refine others’ contributions. In the article “Wikipedia and Participatory Culture: Why Fans Edit” (Thomas, 2015), the author explores why fans prefer wiki pages over other internet spaces. He argues, using theories proposed by Mittel (2013) and Yang and Lai (2010), that editors know their work will be read when disseminated through a wiki format, and that an “internal self-concept motivation” keeps them contributing (4.1). Not only is this satisfactory for the editors, but this format allows the editors to act as experts or scientists on their chosen media (4.3). *Wikipedia*-style websites thus become sites of collaborative participation, with various people contributing to a single subject or article. Editors will continue to use the wiki format to disseminate this kind of information because they know it will be read. As Thomas concludes, the wiki page “both broadcasts and validates fan editors’ work in a way that other outlets for participatory culture simply cannot” (7.1).

Wikis as spaces for community

As I demonstrate with the fan-created wiki page for the television show *Lost*, these sites can also serve as a community space, allowing conversations about particular media to

occur through the editing of the page itself and in associated chat room platforms, such as *Discord*. In 2009, Mittel examined the fan-created wiki for *Lost*. He participated as both a contributor to the forum as a “sysop” and in his role as a researcher. Through his examination of how fans interacted with the site he proved that it became a place for community engagement. With *Lostpedia* in particular, the page even became a site of authority for the show: the creators turned to it when they needed to confirm quick facts in writing sessions (Mittel, 2009, 2.18). The level of detail and accuracy of information helped to solidify the site’s goals and the orientation of information on pages. The editors desired to provide an “authoritative documentation of the canonical story world” (2.15). Mittel does note that “the instability of wikis can be frustrating” but that the “fluidity also allows researchers to engage directly with them when appropriate” (2.9). Fan wikis are a place worthy of examination when engaging in topics related to popular culture and their communities.

Fallout 4’s wiki page: Nukapedia

Fallout 4 (*FO4*) is a single-player, open-world action role-play game, set in post-apocalyptic Massachusetts and surrounding area (“the Commonwealth”). It is part of a series centred around the same nuclear fallout concept. While characters, setting and major plot points shift between the games, the underlying mantra of “war never changes” echoes throughout each installment. In *FO4*, the story begins 210 years after “The Great War,” which resulted in catastrophic environmental destruction through atomic warfare. The player takes the role of the “sole survivor” whose main quest is to find Sean, their infant son, who was stolen from the cryogenic vault their family entered when the bombs were dropped.

The *Fallout 4* official wiki site is hosted at Fandom.com as *Nukapedia*, a play on *Wikipedia* and a fictional product from the game called “Nukacola.”¹ *Fandom* is a company dedicated to becoming the “fan-trusted source in entertainment” and “[providing] a home to explore, contribute to, and celebrate the world of pop culture” (*About*, n.d.). It places the fan as the expert in their wiki pages and site content, solidifying the value of expertise in pop culture and entertainment. The inherent structure of wiki pages, hosted by *Fandom* or otherwise, keeps the sites dedicated to sharing factual and researched information. They are not created to be places of speculation; they are for sharing accurate knowledge on a given topic.

Player/editors on *Nukapedia* collect information through the same means as other videogame wiki pages (see Sköld [2016] for an examination of the *Dark Souls Wiki*; Ratliff [2015] for a study on *World of Warcraft* and its players’ information behaviour; or Harviainen and Hamari [2014] for information seeking and sharing in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games [MMORPG]). By employing direct and indirect recording methods, relying on previous lore established in other *Fallout* installments and consulting officially published player guides, the site can be populated with accurate information regarding the game. There are instances where speculative information has found a place on the site, however, and an effort has been made to remove some of this extrapolated content.

In the “projects” section of the site, there is currently a push to remove more of this speculative content. One such project is the “behind the scenes speculation

¹ See: https://fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Portal:Fallout_4

removal project.”² This project is aimed at removing the speculative elements that have been previously published on the site and makes a conscious effort to prevent more speculative information from being added in the future. The largest section of this particular project refers to mapping real-life locations to in-game locations. Some of these locations and their real-life counterparts are intended to align and were in fact studied by the development team in building the game. One such location is the “Boston Public Library” in *FO4* and the real-life Boston Public Library McKim Building, particularly Bates Hall. The game location is modeled after the real hall and its architectural features are replicated within the game’s abilities. There are other locations, however, that have been assumed to correspond and thus have been detailed on the wiki site. As the developers have not confirmed that they do align, there is a need to cull that data from the site. This speculation does not fit the wiki’s core mission of being an authoritative place for information seekers.

There is another current project related to merging the *Fallout 76* (an online game in the *Fallout* series) wiki page with the established *Nukapedia* site. This requires player/editors to comb through the *Fallout 76* articles and ensure that their formatting follows the established *Nukapedia* modes, all data has merged correctly, images are only used when useful, and that the lore is accurate to what has been established on *Nukapedia*. This project is coordinated by a project lead and several team members. There are established channels of communication for these participants and a checklist denoting what has been accomplished and what still needs to be examined.

² See: fallout.fandom.com/wiki/Fallout_Wiki:Behind_the_scenes_speculation_removal_project

Thus, the heart of the *Nukapedia* site, like many wikis, is to provide a space for collaborative information gathering and organizing.³ Through this collaborative work, players/editors can form a community based on the shared interest of becoming an expert on the *FO4* universe. The players continue to interact in this space and update its content because they know it will be read by and be of use to fellow players. This echoes Mittell's evaluation of the *Lostpedia* page being a site for the community connections and the broadcasting of expert information. It is clear that this process of organizing, verifying, and coordinating information in a wiki-based space is a community effort. It cannot be accomplished by a single person due to the sheer volume of information the sites contain. Fan created wikis are, at their core, sites meant to connect people with shared interests and serve as the space for their community.

Experiencing #1Lib1Ref

I had the pleasure of participating in Western Libraries and FIMS Graduate Library's #1Lib1Ref editing campaign in February 2021.³ This experience led me to reflect on how library professionals could employ more of these edit-a-thons as community building events during this pandemic and beyond. In the case of Western's #1Lib1Ref, the organizers supplied prizes for the top contributors and a few random name-draw winners. They offered links to wiki-pages involving Indigenous communities that needed citations to support the claims written there. One participant mentioned that she was going to focus on some pages involving Black People in honour of Black History Month. If we did not find inspiration in some of the suggested pages, however, we were encouraged to use the *Citation Hunt* web-tool. *Citation Hunt* is a simple website that

³ See <https://1lib1ref.org> for a detailed explanation of the project.

allows editors to locate *Wikipedia* pages that are lacking citations in their articles (Citation Hunt, 2021). A user can simply click a button and an excerpt from a page that needs attention will be shown. Users can also search for specific topics if they want to focus on something they are more knowledgeable in, or if they are not locating a page of personal interest.

I started my foray into the #1Lib1Ref campaign using the *Citation Hunt* tool. Following a few serendipitous clicks, I was pointed to the article on house music and began to edit there. In brief, house music is a genre of electronic music created by and for people within the BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities (A Brief History, n.d.). I chose to contribute to this article as I am quite familiar with the genre and felt it was a way to contribute to the Black History Month prompt. Although I only made a small contribution to the team's overall impact, it still made me reflect on some of the principles Thomas has demonstrated in his work. I certainly felt a sense of satisfaction knowing that I was able to add many citations to the house music *Wikipedia* page. Knowing that these citations would help bolster the factualness of the page kept me motivated to continue adding citations, where possible, until the end of the article.

***Wikipedia* in the library landscape**

So, how can more library professionals take advantage of *Wikipedia* and its collaborative tools? As detailed in *Leveraging Wikipedia* (Kosovsky, 2018), there are several ways that libraries can get involved with the website. Some institutions, such as the New York Public Library, have motivated staff to update or create pages on new archival materials as they are added to their collection. The editor will add a link on the *Wikipedia* page that directs a reader to the entry in their catalogue for further

information (p. 134). Kosovsky also suggests that libraries of special significance could create pages about their institution, including information regarding their collections, unique architecture or recognition of important donors (p. 136).

Public and academic library staff could organize their own edit-a-thons centred on a topic unique to their patrons or their surrounding geographic communities, as a way to promote information literacy, share their archival works, and more. Snyder offers a complete guide on how to begin hosting edit-a-thons. She includes a sample schedule, questions to guide your motivation for the edit-a-thon, tips for maximizing the experience for the participants, and some project ideas, similar to those I suggest below (Snyder, 2018, pp.119-132). Based on Snyder's suggestions, the following list contains potential projects and events for libraries to engage with their communities:

- Contribute citations or information to pages for local minority groups, such as celebrating Indigenous groups and their histories, community celebrations like Black History Month, or information on prominent immigrant communities.
- Create, add to, and edit pages dedicated to local history or historical figures.⁴
- Engage teens and youth in topics that they care about (pop culture, videogames, television, etc.). These events would encourage information literacy skills, an introduction to citation and attribution, an understanding for open and accessible

⁴ If your library system has an archive collection of local history, much like the London Public Library houses in their London Room, this information could be verified and disseminated. This transference of knowledge from the physical, and often restricted, collections into the digital sphere for *all* people to take advantage of would help progress some of librarianship's core values, such as access and preservation (ALA, 2006).

knowledge, and provide young people with a chance to gain a better understanding of how *Wikipedia* functions.⁵

- Employ *Wikipedia* as an activity with new students in the academic library to teach information literacy. Students can learn how to find and evaluate reputable sources for citation and how to use *Wikipedia* as a potential introductory place for research.

Conclusion

Wikipedia is a unique space on the Internet dedicated to providing factual information on any given topic. It uses collaborative editing as a way to create, contribute to, edit, and provide citation for a multitude of topics. As this current pandemic has no end in sight, library staff could organize editing events with small prizes to motivate their patrons to contribute. As noted by Mittel and Thomas, and in my own experience with #1Lib1Ref, there is a satisfaction that comes from contributing to this digital encyclopedia just from knowing that someone will read the information. Wiki-based collaborative editing could be a way to build a sense of community while so many of us are isolated from our usual social groups. These events could also encourage a wide range of people to build their information literacy skills through topics that they enjoy. As the platform only requires access to a computer and internet service to contribute, it is something easy (and budget friendly) to organize and implement as a community building event with potentially lasting impact for those around the globe.

⁵ As noted on *Wikipedia* itself, there are no age restrictions for editing or creating pages (Wikipedia: Guidance for Younger Editors, 2021); their mission is focused on providing high quality, factual information. There are also several pages on the site dedicated to how to get started with editing, what differentiates a reliable source from an unreliable source, and advice for parents.

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