

Wikipedia @ 20

Can Wikipedia serve as a citizen science tool? Building knowledge between amateurs and institutions

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Image credit : G.Garitan, [Editathon, Quai Branly, Wikimedia France](#), 2016

Introduction

I am not an active Wikipedian, neither did I participate in the early beginnings of this amazing adventure. Yet, I would like to tell you a different story, one which, in my view, matters nonetheless in the understanding of Wikipedia. I have been an occasional contributor since 2010 as well as a researcher working on the uses of web-based tools in cultural institutions such as museums and libraries but also international and national bodies (UNESCO, Ministries of Culture, etc.). There is no denying that, in the last ten years, Wikimedia has become a key actor in this sector. It is difficult to identify the exact starting point, but what is certain is that today numerous cultural institutions consider Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons, Wikisource, and all other projects as fundamental tools of their action of mediation and popularization. As an example, we can mention the initiative *Wiki Loves Monuments*, a photo contest organized by the Wikimedia Foundation since 2011, resulting in enriching Wikimedia Commons with images of monuments from all over the world. At the beginning, the GLAM were the simple subjects of the photos, but they have today become major actors and organizers of the event. Similarly, *editathons*, i.e. meetings that gather people to help Wikipedia reinforce content on specific topics, are more and more often organized by or in collaboration with cultural institutions.

At first glance, the involvement of an institution in Wikipedia activities can be seen as a very positive fact. Yet, at a closer look, it raises important contradictions with the original idea of the Encyclopedia. Along the last twenty years, Wikipedia has emerged as the main arena for amateurs' free expression. Wikipedia is known for its auto-regulatory structure and its autonomy from public bodies and big enterprises, notably the GAFAM. Yet, today, its visibility and its leading role in collective knowledge construction processes have attracted the attention of institutions, especially in the cultural field. Coping with the growing need of involving the public and of building a common knowledge, cultural institutions have considered using Wikipedia in order to approach culture's lovers and involve them in institutional research activities.^[1] Yet, is it possible to transform Wikipedia from an exemplary case of amateurs' arena into an institutional space? How can/should professionals behave in order to respect the pillars of Wikipedia? How will Wikipedians feel when asked to participate in an institutional project?

This chapter aims at investigating the recent evolution of the relationship between amateurs and institutions or, in other words, between non-professionals and professionals in regards to Wikipedia. This relationship is generally complex and can become even more complex when it occurs in a digital space which has been fundamentally thought out for non-professionals and rejects all signs and symbols of external authority. Yet, in our studies,^[2] we observed that new arrangements have been

negotiated between Wikipedians and institutional representatives in order to facilitate the integration of the institutional action in this originally exclusively amateurs' space. Does it come in contradiction with the initial spirit of the platform? Are these changes jeopardizing the transformation of Wikipedia from a bottom-up to a top-down platform? What do these changes portend for the future of Wikipedia?

In order to answer these questions, this article is organized in three parts. In the first part, we briefly recall the original spirit and the main pillars of Wikipedia, notably by highlighting the principles of non-originality and of neutrality. In the second part, we present a case study, that of the evolution of the relation between Wikipedia' amateurs and institutions in France. Indeed, in this country, these actors now interact in different ways on Wikipedia, and more extensively with various Wikimedia projects. In the third part, we reflect on the impact of institutions' involvement on Wikipedia's rules and functioning and, consequently, on the future perspectives that have been introduced by these changes. In particular, we discuss the possibility of considering Wikipedia as a citizen science tool rather than as a means of dissemination, and we identify the important consequences that this shift would have on the spirit of the Initiative.

When Wikipedia was a neutral territory belonging to amateurs ...

Wikipedia was created in January 2001, and two months later a French version was launched. In 2008, this version already contained 700.000 pages that have been growing every year ever since and now reach over 2 millions of pages. The Encyclopedia can count on 3,5 millions contributors (ab. 20 000 active contributors)[3] who add or modify pages day by day for the Common Good. These contributors, also called amateurs, culture's lovers or volunteers, are the only people able to take decisions on the platform. As already defined in the initial project of Richard Stallman, no institution or external authority should intrude and control the platform.[4] In the first years of existence of the Encyclopedia, the contributors have established a complex system of governance that completely excludes traditional institutional power identified by the law and the State.[5] Decisions are mainly based on the arbitration committee that is elected by contributors. As is well known, throughout the years, Wikipedia has been based on five pillars that were also established by the contributors' community itself at the beginning of the project, and which have never been modified.[6] Two of them especially drew my attention for their ability to limit the type of content that can be created on the platform.

The first pillar states: "Wikipedia is an encyclopedia", that is to say, "a written compendium of knowledge". According to this pillar, Wikipedia is not the place for opinions or ideas neither for any original content. As clearly stated by the ancient president of the Wikimedia Foundation, Florence

Devouard, “Wikipedia is not intended to present unpublished information. As classic encyclopedias, its purpose is limited to exposing already established and recognized knowledge.”^[7] Indeed, Wikipedia embodies the dream of knowledge sharing. It aims at building a collection of already existent pieces of knowledge in a space accessible to everyone. Consequently, no new knowledge should be created in Wikipedia neither should any original work be published on it.

The second pillar states “Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view” (NPOV). Accordingly, articles should have an impartial tone that documents and explains major points of view and should be based on reliable and authoritative sources. The definition of acceptable sources change from one country to another. In the French context, they are quite strict because only secondary sources are generally accepted (for ex. established national newspapers) with a publication date of at least two years. Interestingly, institutional websites are not considered as reliable sources.

Day after day, Wikipedians work to ensure the respect of these pillars. If you ever try to create a new page on the Encyclopedia, you know that it is surely not easy. If administrators and other Wikipedians rapidly contact you to welcome you on the platform and propose their assistance, they can intervene just as fast to delete the page that you devotedly created because it is too partial, too original or not supported by sufficiently numerous or trustable sources.^[8] Indeed, one of the main difficulties encountered by beginners is that they should be able to create new pages without creating original content and, at the same time, without copying an existent one (copyright is strictly respected in Wikipedia).

At this point, it should be clear that these pillars make Wikipedia a particularly difficult terrain for institutions, or better for professionals that cannot lean on the acknowledgement of their status on the platform. Institutions cannot cite themselves as sources, cannot make their point of view prevail based on their official position neither can they copy institutional documents in order to quickly enrich pages. Besides, this context is even more challenging if we take into account the technocratic character of Wikipedia where the technical and literal application of rules is generally preferred to a more democratic and flexible interpretation.

When cultural institutions discovered Wikipedia...

In the early days, Wikipedia was not particularly welcomed, especially by institutions officially in charge of knowledge sharing. Numerous criticisms were raised about the veracity of contents, the anonymity of sources, the deluge of errors and several others. Yet, it is important to note that uses and users of the Encyclopedia have grown together with criticisms. In France, the situation was even more

difficult than in other countries. During the 2000, the French cultural system, mainly based on the idea of the cultural exception,^[9] rejected important Internet revolutions such as Google^[10] and Wikipedia, identified as symbols of American power. In particular, in the case of Wikipedia, the general criticisms against it were reinforced by a major argument stating that “even if Wikipedia is not a capitalist enterprise, it is an encyclopedic project that would compete with the encyclopedic spirit of the Enlightenment, that France gave to the world.”^[11] Alexandre Moatti, one of the main researchers who have been contributing to the reflection on the role of Wikipedia in France, talks about “anti-wikipedianism”^[12] in order to describe the fear that the idea of “free” encyclopedia inspires among French cultural institutions, perceived as a symbol of American liberalism and a rejection of state power.

In spite of this difficult start, in the last ten years, the Wikimedia France Foundation has signed more than forty agreements with cultural institutions and public bodies such as the French National Library (BNF), the National Archives, the Centre Pompidou, the Louvre Lens, the *Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine* and numerous cities (Lille, Bordeaux, Grenoble, etc.) and universities (Rennes 2, Lille, etc.). How to explain such shift of attitude? Why have institutions finally embraced the world of Wikimedia? A way to understand this new alliance between amateurs and professionals consists in looking at the conventions themselves. The majority of them^[13] concern the organization of contributory days, also called editathons. These meetings are generally hosted on the grounds of the institution and aim at creating new content in Wikipedia related to the objects in charge of the institution. The success of such initiatives is based on the interaction between three types of actors: the professionals that provide the knowledge related to the object (often in the form of books and print material); the amateurs or culture's lovers willing to contribute to the project and the Wikipedians that help the other participants in editing the platform. These initiatives can vary from international projects such as Art+Feminism,^[14] carried out by several associations and institutions around the world to local projects that concern a specific institution or city, such as the City of Ceramics in Sèvres. Laurence Maynier, the representative of the City stated: “It is a free agreement, which combines our common interests: for the City of Ceramics, it is a question of valuing, preserving, sharing its gestures and its know-how; for Wikipedia, to enrich its platform in a field weakly fed by Internet users, thanks to photographs taken during our workshops, and the opportunity to regularly enrich the topic”.^[15]

If you ever participate in this kind of event as an amateur, you can surely testify to the difficulty of embracing such challenge. Which page should I modify? Which page can I create? What can I do? What can't I? etc. Actually, any contributor participating in an editathon is in-between the rules of the institution and the ones of Wikipedia, between the truth established by the professionals and the need to find other secondary sources to re-verify it. For her or him, it is very hard to attend both the institution's expectation and the pillars of Wikipedia (especially the first one, imposing to create only

content pertaining to notable and non-original subjects, and the second one, imposing to do it according to a neutral point of view).

So, the story of an editathon can turn into two different ways. The unhappy ending is when the rules of Wikipedia are strictly applied. In this case, amateurs, novices of the platform, are quickly frustrated because their contents will hardly pass the threshold of Wikipedians' validation and, rejection after rejection, they end up abandoning their volunteer mission. However, there is also a happy ending. It usually happens when informal arrangements are taken between the Wikipedians who participate in the editathon and the other Wikipedians acting online. These arrangements allow the building of grey areas where rules are interpreted in a more flexible way. What makes these arrangements work is that they involve both sides: professionals accept the rules of Wikipedia by respecting the etiquette (for example by introducing themselves on their personal page) and the copyright, and by accepting to find external non-institutional sources to validate their expertise; Wikipedians derogate to strict rules and provide some solutions to distinguish the content created during "institutional" editathons or related to institutional projects from other contents, such as building a Wikipedia project and including a lateral box showing the link to the project in all related pages. These grey areas are more welcoming for amateurs who, even when they do not know all the rules and do not control the whole context, will be able to do some edits that will survive.

The example of the French Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage will provide further insight. This category of cultural heritage has been acknowledged by a UNESCO Convention (2003) as encompassing the oral expressions and traditions as well as the knowledge and skills that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. According to the UNESCO Convention, practitioners should be the main actors of the safeguarding action and should, more specifically, contribute to the inventories of such shared traditions.^[16] In light of this, the French Ministry of Culture has tried using Wikipedia as a tool for facilitating public participation of non-professionals in writing the files related to French Intangible Cultural Heritage. A Wikipedia project^[1] has been created in 2011 and has been mainly administered by the Ministry since 2015. In the frame of this project, some professionals of the Ministry have transcribed about 200 files belonging to this official inventory on Wikipedia.^[17] As a following step, in order to favor the participation of practitioners and the general public in their editing, several editathons and training workshops have been organized. What is interesting in this case is that these 200 pages did survive, even though most of them clearly do not respect all the pillars of Wikipedia. Several of these cultural heritage items, such as the Ar Mest Ball Game or the Canaval of Amou, are surely not remarkable at national level (so much so that their inclusion in an encyclopedia is questionable) and only few of them can be supported by secondary external sources; in fact, for most of them, their main sources come from institutional documents and websites (meaning that they do not conform to the NPOV). So,

clearly an exception to the amateurs' rules has been made in order to encounter the needs of the institution. how could they let such a thing happen?

When citizen science makes its entrance on Wikipedia...

The question of the relationship between Wikipedia and the institutions is not new. Yet, until now it has been approached from two perspectives only. The first one concerns more specifically the relation between educational institutions (schools and universities) and students that are generally not authorized to use the Encyclopedia for their homework. In this case, the institution is not a direct actor in Wikipedia or is not interacting with the Wikipedians, yet retrospectively it decides which use can be or cannot be done with contents published on the platform. Therefore the institution is not interfering with the rules that Wikipedians have settled. The second perspective relates to the role of scientific truth in Wikipedia. Institutions have often criticized the platform when not presenting their point of view or mixing it with others. This is for example the case for pages related to climate change and notable climate-skeptical positions. Yet, also in this case, the institution generally intervenes after the creation of the content and outside the platform when voicing criticisms.

What is different in the case we just described in this chapter is that the institution intervenes in the phase of content creation and somehow affects Wikipedia rules and functioning. In particular, we can identify two items that collide with the original spirit of Wikipedia.

Firstly, there is a diversification of social actors intervening on the Encyclopedia. In the original project, the only actor is the contributor who justifies his/her identity and authority only inside the platform. Each contributor can have a specific role and expertise inside the world of Wikipedia but he/she cannot take advantage of his/her profession or institutional position inside the platform. Yet, as we saw, the current scenario is more complicated than this. The Conventions between Wikimedia France and institutions have created protected grey areas where professionals can be tolerated and benefit from derogations to regular rules, for example about the type of accepted sources. These grey areas are generally built throughout face-to-face meetings between institutional representatives and Wikipedians where rules are negotiated. Yet, can the professional keep a neutral point of view and, in the case of controversies, not privilege the perspective of the institution when he/she is editing Wikipedia?

Secondly, in these Wikipedia-institutions projects, the finality seems to go beyond simple knowledge sharing. Indeed, these institution-related projects generally consist in big campaigns aiming at creating new content in Wikipedia based on some knowledge already built by the institution outside

the platform. In practical terms, these initiatives consist in gathering citizens in an institution's headquarters, providing them with institutional documents and other references, and asking them to build new Wikipedia pages (or enrich the existing ones) about objects of which the institution is in charge. In the wake of copyright concerns that these "knowledge migration operations" may raise, we want here to draw attention to a deeper question. Is it actually possible, during these types of event, to share existing knowledge without building new knowledge? In other words, is it possible to respect the first pillar of Wikipedia?

In order to answer this question, it may be useful to focus on the objectives of the institution in organizing this kind of initiative. Based on our exchanges with several French professionals in the cultural sector in charge of organizing editathons, contributory days and similar initiatives in recent years, there is absolutely no doubt that these professionals' willingness to contribute to the sharing of knowledge on Wikipedia is generally associated with other objectives more directly related to their institution. Nowadays, cultural institutions are looking for new ways to engage the public in their activities. The aim is not only to attract and develop public interest in their collection but also to involve them actively in the research activities carried out by the institution. This trend is part of a general phenomenon called "citizen science". Generally, are included under this term, that has become particularly fashionable in the recent years, all initiatives that aim at facilitating the public participation of non-professionals in scientific research and in building scientific knowledge. [\[18\]](#)

What we want to demonstrate here is that, in these institutional projects, Wikipedia is not simply used as an encyclopedia for sharing knowledge but rather as a crowdsourcing platform for facilitating the co-construction of (new) knowledge involving both professionals and non-professionals, institutional representatives and citizens. Generally, Wikipedia is not considered as a tool of citizen science because its actual goal is not to create new science but simply to diffuse the existing one. Yet, in projects such as the French Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage, where the Encyclopedia becomes the space of negotiation between professional and non-professional actors, it is difficult to define the border between the diffusion and the construction of knowledge. On these pages, what is at stake is the definition of some cultural objects on which institutions and practitioners can bring different viewpoints, and the regulation of Wikipedia allows to define them as boundary objects and facilitate the compromise between different visions of the world. Yet, is it possible to agree on a boundary object without producing a new definition for it? The goal of this paper is not to answer this question but rather to simply underline how the functioning of Wikipedia is particularly suitable for producing citizen science even if this contradicts the pillars and the original spirit of the platform as an encyclopedia.

Conclusion

This paper does not mean to criticize Wikipedia and Wikipedians by highlighting the non-respect of the pillars defined by the community. Conversely, it aims at highlighting some new emerging trends in Wikipedia related to the increasing interactions between Wikipedians and institution representatives. We argue that institutions are paradoxically attracted to the free Encyclopedia because it can work effectively as a citizen science tool for building new knowledge through participatory processes rather than as a simple encyclopedia for sharing the existing knowledge. What cannot be doubted is that the existent pillars of Wikipedia are hardly compatible with this new potential mission of the platform.

Yet, as a conclusion, it is equally important not to forget the last pillar, “Wikipedia has no firm rules” or, in its original version, “Be bold!”. According to this pillar, all rules are not carved in stone and can be put into discussion and eventually change. So maybe, as the relationship between amateurs and institutions is changing at societal level, Wikipedians also should consider redefining this relationship in regards to the platform by finding new ways of creating collective knowledge and managing multiple viewpoints in one page.

[1] Ridge, M. M. (eds), *Crowdsourcing our cultural heritage*, Ashgate Publishing, Ltd, 2014.

[2] Severo M., “Safeguarding without a Record? The Digital Inventories of Intangible Cultural Heritage”, A. Romele, E. Terrone (eds.), *Toward a Philosophy of New Media*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 165-182.

[3] Only contributors having made at least one edit in the last 30 days are considered as active.

[4] Stallman R. *The Free Universal Encyclopaedia and Learning Resource*. Free Software Foundation, 1999.

[5] Yet, every national version has different rules. For example, it is important to notice that the English version, in its first year, had a quite hierarchical management under the authority of Jimmy Wales, also called the GodKing.

[6] Yet, small changes in the content of each pillar are discussed every day.

[7] Devouard, F. & Paumier, G. *Wikipédia: Découvrir, utiliser, contribuer*, Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2009, p. 8.

[8] In the French version of Wikipedia some criteria of admissibility of articles are defined (https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:Crit%C3%A8res_d%27admissibilit%C3%A9_des_articles). They refer especially to the notoriety of an article subject.

- [9] Benhamou, F., “L'exception culturelle. Exploration d'une impasse”, *Esprit*, 2004, p. 85-113.
- [10] The opposition especially concerned GoogleBooks. With the help of enormous funds, the French government financed projects of digital libraries such as Europeana and the French National Library, Gallica, in the hope of creating a rival able to live up to the American giant.
- [11] Moatti, A., *Au pays de Numérix*, Presses universitaires de France, 2015, p. 62-63.
- [12] Moatti, A., “Postures d’opposition à Wikipédia en milieu intellectuel en France”, Barbe et al., *Wikipédia. Object scientifique non identifié*, Nanterre, Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2015.
- [13] Interestingly, some of them, such as the one with the Museum of Cluny, concern the training from the professionals of the institution in feeding Wikipedia.
- [14] Art+Feminism is a campaign based on the organization of editathons aiming at improving the coverage of cis- and transgender women, non-binary folks, feminism, and the arts, on Wikipedia. See: <http://www.artandfeminism.org/>.
- [15] <https://www.lesechos.fr/2013/01/la-cite-de-la-ceramique-sallie-a-wikipedia-335119>
- [16] Blake, J., “UNESCO’s 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage: The implications of community involvement in ‘safeguarding’”, *Intangible Heritage* Routledge, 2004, p. 59-87.
- [17] https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inventaire_du_patrimoine_culturel_immat%C3%A9riel_en_France The operation of transcription was quite complex because files were covered by copyright and described objects were not always compatible with Wikipedia
- [18] Haklay, M., “Citizen science and volunteered geographic information: Overview and typology of participation”, *Crowdsourcing geographic knowledge*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2013, p. 105-122.