BUILDING A SHARED
UNDERSTANDING

Liam Wyatt was the world's first Wikipedian in Residence at the British Museum. He is also the global cultural partnerships coordinator for the Wikimedia Foundation and founder of the GLAM–WIKI movement at the conference of the same name in Canberra in 2009. He believes understanding the changing nature of curation is key to working with Wikipedia.

"Imagine a world in which everyone has free access to the sum of human knowledge in their own language."

This is the mission statement of the Wikimedia Foundation, upon which Wikipedia is built. It expresses the same Enlightenment spirit as those collectors and classifiers who built the great dictionaries and libraries. However, just as in the Age of Enlightenment, the tension between knowledge professionals and polymath amateurs remains.

That tension and the unnecessary opposition of two groups with passion and conviction – one with the authority and one without – can be seen in contemporary debates over the term 'curation'.

At one extreme is an exclusivist understanding that sees the curator as a focal point of cultural understanding. At the other extreme is a radical flattening of the term's connotations to the point of being merely synonymous with 'selecting'. However, neither of these extremes is particularly helpful in envisaging successful cultural sector projects which require community involvement.

Between these extreme viewpoints lies a productive, mutually beneficial relationship. Such a relationship is built upon a collaborative understanding of the idea of curation.

It respects expertise but demands engagement; it is focused neither on giving nor taking knowledge but on building a shared understanding. Thus, it is more helpful to think in terms of 'open authority' and 'community curated works' (CCW) rather than 'user-generated content' (UGC) or crowdsourcing.

That said, it is not altogether self-evident how cultural institutions can engage with Wikipedia – the fifth most visited website in the world, built entirely by amateur enthusiasts keen to collect and share knowledge freely. The key for libraries lies in the policy that all facts included in Wikipedia must be verified to a reliable third party source.

The principal advantage of this 'outsourcing of truth' system is that it obviates all discussions about which editor is more correct because the criterion is always verifiability – not truth. With this editorial rule the published research output from cultural institutions and the resource-finding work of libraries becomes absolutely crucial for Wikipedia as a source of reliable references.

Far from competing with experts and research publications, Wikipedia (after all, a tertiary source) is dependent upon cultural institutions to write the secondary sources from which footnotes can be made, and help identify the primary sources in their collections. Wikipedia's use of this information in turn drives traffic back to the original materials and institutions from whence it came.

This cycle draws more people into the deep collections records of cultural institutions than ever before. This is precisely what happened in the 48 hour period after Minister Hunt's Wikipedia comment (see story opposite). The *Bushfires in Australia* article quickly grew an extremely well footnoted section specifically about climate change using resources found in Australian libraries' online services.

Wikipedia is like nothing that has ever gone before it and yet it is a direct successor to the enlightenment tradition of naming, classifying and describing the universe. While very complex, often confusing and constantly changing, it is one of the most important cultural resources ever developed.

Wikipedia and the cultural sector are often doing the same thing, for the same reason, in the same medium and for the same audience. Why not do it together?

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To find out more about the State Library of New South Wales Wikipedia project visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM/SLNSW

For more information on how cultural organisations can work with Wikipedia, visit www.glamwiki.org.

If you are considering contributing to Wikipedia on behalf of your institution, the following guidelines are helpful in understanding how to establish a sustainable relationship with Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM/National_Archives_and_Records_Administration/Guidelines.