
WHY NOT WIKIBRARIANS?

Do you get edgy when someone quotes Wikipedia as a source? INCITE asked Liam Wyatt, whose day job is Social Media Coordinator at the National Library of Australia, and Michael Carney, who spoke about Wikipedia at the 2013 Library and Information Technicians' Symposium, to share their personal points of view.

SOURCES OF SUBSTANCE

Michael Carney works as a librarian in original materials at the State Library of New South Wales, using Wikipedia and Wikimedia Commons to link researchers back to invaluable resources held in the collection. Michael believes Wikipedia offers libraries a significant opportunity.

It wasn't just the weather that heated up so intensely last year. October's severe temperatures provided the backdrop for some of the worst ever bushfires in Australia and reignited the debate about whether such extreme conditions were a consequence of climate change.

Commentators at home and abroad weighed in on the discussion, including UN senior official Christiana Figueres, who argued that "it is absolutely clear that the science is telling us that there are increasing heat waves in Asia, Europe, and Australia". Our Federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt however, disagreed with this analysis. During a BBC radio interview on 22 October 2013 Hunt argued that these bushfires were, as they have always been, merely a function of life in Australia. His source? Wikipedia.

"I looked up what Wikipedia said for example, just to see what the rest of the world thought, and it opens up with the fact the bushfires in Australia are frequently occurring events during the hotter months of the year," Hunt told the BBC.

The public's response to the Minister's use of Wikipedia in this context was understandably quite critical. Fairfax columnist Tony Wright thought that if Wikipedia was as reliable a source as Hunt conceded, then he could refer to his own Wiki page which described the minister as "terrible at his job". On behalf of ALIA, Executive Director Sue McKerracher wrote to *The Age*, diagnosing Hunt's reference to Wikipedia as a symptom of the continuing neglect that government department libraries are facing.

After such reactions, I get the feeling that Minister Hunt won't be name-dropping Wikipedia at his next cocktail party. However the question arises here, how has Wikipedia got itself such a bad rap?

An answer to this question may be found if we give ourselves a quick refresher on 'referencing sources 101'. Library and information professionals know there are

three broad categories of information: primary, secondary and tertiary. We could cite primary sources in this case such as weather temperatures. Our secondary sources would be interpretations of this information, such as a comparison of historic weather temperatures with the frequency of bushfires. And for a tertiary source? You guessed it! Something like Wikipedia, which can collate these sources to provide an overview.

Referring to Wikipedia in a scientific debate is a bit like turning up to a Beatles record collectors' meeting with the latest 'Best of' CD. While an overview can address a bit of fleeting interest, for in-depth understanding we need to go back in time and get our hands dirty. And who is it that can provide us with some of the best primary and secondary materials? Right again – libraries!

And here lies one of the best opportunities that libraries have in the current information climate. As we see in the case of Minister Hunt, libraries are no longer necessarily the first port of call for people researching an issue. If libraries can jump in and contribute to online information spaces such as Wikipedia, we can play a bigger part in responding to people's queries and pointing them towards sources of substance. Such initiative gets right to the core of libraries and their role in creating a more informed society.

An example from my workplace, the State Library of New South Wales, illustrates the opportunities available to libraries to share information through Wikipedia. To coincide with last year's bicentenary, a colleague and I created a Wikipedia page called *The 1813 Crossing Of The Blue Mountains*.

The State Library of NSW holds a multitude of primary and secondary sources related to this event including both Wentworth and Lawson's original journals, paintings and a sword said to have belonged to Blaxland. Not only were we able to cite these sources in our article, through Wikimedia Commons (Wikipedia's media repository) we could also embed high-quality digital images of these materials.

Now, if someone performs a Google query on the crossing of the Blue Mountains, the first result will take them to a direct encounter with the primary sources and provide clear pointers back to the institution which holds them. It is a perfect example of libraries providing accurate and authoritative sources to those who are searching.

Each of our libraries have their own specialisations and can be a trusted voice in the community on a given topic. Whether it be on local history, university subjects, fiction, or cultural events, we hold an infinite number of materials that people need to know about. It is up to us, as the institutions which hold this information, to put it in the most findable places. Maybe then, even a bit of surface research won't result in anyone talking through their hat.

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