



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

(NB this audio slide show is called Wiki 1)

Wikipedian in Residence

Audio slide show transcription

Andrew Gray:

In the UK the average internet user reads I think about fifteen Wikipedia pages every month, that's one every two days.

Narrator:

Whether we like to admit it or not, a first port of call for many of us when looking for information is Wikipedia. For that reason there is also an increasing recognition that the academic world should embrace this source of knowledge and help feed into the process. In April 2012 Andrew Gray was appointed Wikipedian in Residence at the British Library, a one year post funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Andrew Gray:

With this project we aimed to look at the ways in which some of the AHRC research projects were already engaging with Wikipedia and what we could do to help make that more efficient, make some of the material more visible. Why, we could ask, were some of the projects that we thought would be very valuable not being used at all, and try and come up with some answers for these, and then to build an infrastructure for researchers in the future to be able to say, we really want to engage Wikipedia with this project, we really want to make it easy for people to come and reuse our material as source material, what can we do to do that? What's the magic thing we need to know? So we wanted to produce some guidelines and some examples and some case studies for that.

We looked at encouraging British Library staff and AHRC researchers to engage with the existing Wikipedia community, not simply from the perspective of providing content but from the perspective of directly engaging in the editorial process. So we ran a series of workshops. In these workshops, in around fifty sessions, we had about four hundred people gain a basic understanding of how the community worked and how

to engage with it. This covered about a hundred British Library staff, a hundred to a hundred and fifty researchers elsewhere in the country, many of whom were AHRC funded, a large number of readers at the British Library and a variety of others. Finally we looked at trying to build the infrastructure to ensure that there will be projects going forward.

Narrator:

One example of an AHRC supported initiative that has benefited from Andrew's work is the Darwin Correspondence Project. Online visitors to their site are not only given information about the content of Darwin's correspondence, they can also discover more about who he was writing to.

This innovative approach to capturing research is therefore leading to a wealth of new biographical information. Elizabeth Smith from the project says that Andrew has played an important role in nurturing this aspect, particularly regarding the women that Darwin corresponded with, who've become known as Darwin's Angels.

Elizabeth Smith:

He offered to come and run a one day event for us for International Women's Day and he helped us write new articles about some people who hadn't been on Wikipedia at all thus far, which was really interesting. One of the nice things about the correspondence is it shows us the breadth of scientific activities that women were involved in, in the nineteenth century. So you may have someone like Mary Anne Whitby who is not very well known at all any more but Darwin regarded her as one of the world's foremost authorities on breeding silk worms, for example. Obviously the core project is the publication of the letters, the transcripts, and we produce these other resources and bodies of content sort of as a secondary level of content, which is produced but not always made the most of because it's not the primary thing, but is very useful for things like Wikipedia, it's a very symbiotic relationship I think. By putting things on Wikipedia we can not only increase understanding of the nineteenth century in general and some of these figures in particular, but also direct people to all the other things that we have for them on our website - then that's a job well done for us.

Narrator:

Another research area to benefit from the Wikipedian in Residence initiative is the International Dunhuang Project based at the British Library. The Director is Susan Whitfield.

Susan Whitfield:

What we're trying to do is to preserve and make accessible all the archaeological artefacts from the eastern part of the great trade routes, the Silk Road of the first millennium AD. We've been very lucky as a project, we've been going since the mid-nineties and we've had several AHRC grants to digitise and catalogue material from the British Library primarily, manuscripts from the Silk Road. But recently we've had a grant which is about fourteen months, to provide greater access to some of the material we've digitised before, by giving it greater context, by contextualising it and one of the parts of that has been by providing greater access on Wikipedia. We had a week long Wikipedia Editathon, which was based here at the British Library, but which we saw encourage people, partners worldwide, also to take part in, and remote people in universities and other people. They worked on an article, usually in small groups. We provided help with the source materials and the Wikipedians provided help with using Wikipedia and this is something now they're going to carry on.

Narrator:

Andrew Gray's time as Wikipedian in Residence at the British Library has helped to inspire other projects including a similar scheme at the National Library of Scotland. Andrew says that AHRC's support of the wikimedia approach is playing an important role in improving access to information and knowledge for everyone.

Andrew Gray:

AHRC was the first formal public body to fund a Wikipedian in Residence programme like this. Prior to this they'd all been either voluntary or supported by either the institution itself or by Wikimedia or one of its organisations. It also meant that we had a very good way of working with the research community which wouldn't have been available simply from inside the confines of the library, and I think in many ways the infrastructure we're building for those researchers and for research projects in the future will be very valuable going forward. It will potentially be more valuable than the work I did directly with the library itself because we're building the tools for researchers to do this themselves and it can be generalised, it doesn't have to be AHRC funded researchers, it could be researchers funded by anyone else or indeed by themselves, it doesn't have to be researchers in the UK. These are very much generalisable skills and they generalise to working with other non-traditional information dissemination communities, not simply with Wikipedia.