Should archivists edit Wikipedia, and if so how?

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ABSTRACT
Archival codes of ethics emphasize promoting archives and making them available to a wide audience. Literature highlights the importance of ‘participatory archives,’ often using Web 2.0 technologies. Using Archives 2.0 as a framework, this article suggests that archivists can move towards these goals by increasing their engagement with the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia. After identifying this wider context, the article evaluates in detail existing literature specifically on the subject of Wikipedia and archives. Particular scrutiny is placed on several case studies written by US university archivists who aimed to promote collections, and the issues they collectively highlight. To explore the question of how archives should engage with Wikipedia, this article uses a markedly different methodology to the case study literature. In-depth interviews were carried out with professional ‘Wikipedians in Residence’ who have worked with archivists, as well as archive professionals with relevant experience. An analysis section focuses on understanding Wikipedians’ perspectives on archives’ engagement with Wikipedia, comparing them with those of archive professionals, and ultimately emphasizing the importance of a collaborative way of working together. The conclusion makes recommendations based on this and draws out theoretical implications for Archives 2.0.

Introduction
Wikipedia, which defines itself as a ‘multilingual, web-based, free-content encyclopedia project … based on a model of openly editable content,’1 was launched in 2001, and archives have involved themselves with it in different ways for at least a decade. This article does not, therefore, examine an especially novel phenomenon. Originality comes from focusing on the overall picture of archives’ engagement with Wikipedia; others have presented individual case studies, or mentioned the topic in wider discussions of ‘Web 2.0.’ The article draws parallels between archives’ involvement with Wikipedia and overarching goals currently ascribed to the profession. These parallels are arguably underappreciated, perhaps because Wikipedia’s quality and reliability have long been questioned – although support for its role in academia is growing.2 After outlining why archivists should consider working with Wikipedia, the article addresses its other central question: how should they do it? The conclusion then draws out some theoretical implications. Part of the research strategy involved...
interviewing ‘Wikipedians in Residence’ with relevant experience. Their perspectives, unrepresented in archival literature before now, help address the questions this article poses.

Wikipedia is an example of ‘Web 2.0,’ but differs from ‘social media’ because it is not ‘purely … a forum for users to connect with other users.’ It can fulfil this function, but the focus is improving the encyclopaedia. The non-profit Wikimedia Foundation manages Wikipedia and several ‘sister’ projects. Those of particular interest to archives include Wikisource, ‘a free collection of primary source materials’; Wikimedia Commons, ‘a free media repository’; and Wikidata, ‘a structured data repository used by all Wikimedia projects.’

The role of ‘Wikipedian (or Wikimedian) in Residence’ (hereafter ‘WIR’), first developed in 2010 by Wikimedia’s ‘GLAM-Wiki’ (‘Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums’) initiative, can be either paid or voluntary. It is ‘fundamentally about enabling the host organisation and its members to continue a productive relationship with the encyclopedia and its community’; WIRs do not only edit articles, but seek to promote understanding of Wikipedia amongst staff, including archivists, and organize events such as ‘edit-a-thons,’ which bring groups together to edit Wikipedia.

Before continuing, it is worth noting Flinn’s advice:

The evidence regarding the success or otherwise of online collaborative initiatives … is limited at present … we should be careful neither to exaggerate the potential of these developments nor to close down or ignore the opportunity that they offer.

It is suggested here that archives’ involvement with Wikipedia should be seen as an ‘online collaborative initiative’ that many archives ought to consider engaging with in a more than superficial manner. But care is taken not to overstate the benefits, or let the analysis share the arguably idealistic tone detectable in some of how the Wikipedia community portrays itself.

**Literature review**

This literature review is divided into two subsections. The first assesses the wider context for archives’ involvement with Wikipedia, using the concept of ‘Archives 2.0’ as a framework to suggest that this involvement fits well with the current view of the archival mission. The second gathers together for critical reflection several case studies written by archivists who have worked on Wikipedia, comparing their ideas with the findings of the first subsection.

**Context for archives working with Wikipedia**

Even at first glance, archivists getting involved in Wikipedia seems very much in accordance with the principles which nominally guide their practice. The ICA’s Access Principles state:

Archivists have a professional responsibility to promote access to archives … They are continually alert to changing technologies of communication and use those that are available and practical to promote the knowledge of archives … They proactively provide access to the parts of their holdings that are of wide interest to the public through print publication, digitization, postings on the institution’s website, or by cooperation with external publication projects.

The ARA Code of Ethics encourages similar efforts:

8. Members … should encourage the use of records to the greatest extent possible, consistent with institutional policies, the preservation of holdings, legal considerations, individual rights, and donor agreements.
12. Members should promote the awareness, preservation understanding and use of the world’s documentary heritage amongst stakeholders, cultural and information professionals and the public, and where appropriate, work co-operatively with the members of their own and other professions to do so.8

These principles reflect what Cook has described as ‘a collective shift during the past century from a juridical-administrative justification for archives grounded in concepts of the state, to a socio-cultural justification for archives grounded in wider public policy and public use.’9

‘Archives 2.0,’ described as ‘a framework for defining the ideas and attitudes shaping archival practice today and on which archivists can continue to build,’ is useful for developing this initial impression.10 Theimer, who first outlined it, characterizes it as ‘an approach to archival practice that promotes openness and flexibility’; archivists must ‘be user-centred and embrace opportunities to use technology to share collections [and] interact with users.’11 It is, she emphasizes, ‘more than simply “Archives + Web 2.0,” although Web 2.0 technologies, of which Wikipedia is a prominent example, are a significant factor in realizing the principles of Archives 2.0.12 Palmer heralds it as ‘a broader epistemological shift which concerns the very nature of the archive.’13 Working with Wikipedia relates to several aspects of Archives 2.0, and it is difficult to link it to one aspect in particular. This elusiveness (which can also be presented as flexibility) may partly explain why Wikipedia has received little attention in archival literature.

**Openness**
Theimer links a change in many archives’ access policies – from restricting access based on researchers’ qualifications to striving to ensure ‘the broadest possible use’ of collections – to the use of popular and widely accessible Web 2.0 ‘spaces’ by archives.14 Archivists adding links to Wikipedia and editing articles relating to their collections undoubtedly fits this trend. Indeed, one of the case studies Theimer cites involves an archivist working on Wikipedia.

But ‘openness’ should also be understood in the context of making content available without restrictions, or ‘open access.’ Terras considers the significance of galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAMs) making their content available this way digitally, emphasizing that ‘it is possible to digitize cultural heritage materials … and not actually make them any more accessible than they were previously’; maximizing accessibility involves enabling ‘reuse, remixing and repurposing’ of content ‘for any purpose.’15 The National Archives (TNA) offers likeminded guidance: ‘Archives should … Explore ways to build infrastructure to enable the re-use and re-interpretation of online collections, and expose the information to the widest possible audience.’16 This supports archives uploading content to Wikimedia Commons, where everything must have a ‘free’ licence such as CC0, CC-BY or the Open Government Licence, or be in the public domain.17

**Participation**
In 2002, Duff and Harris called for descriptive systems with ‘holes that allow in the voices of our users.’18 Cook more recently anticipated a new paradigm based on ‘participatory archiving,’ involving ‘virtual communities united by social media in cyberspace.’19 This echoes the Archives 2.0 trend of archivists assuming the role of ‘facilitator,’ rather than ‘gatekeeper.’20
is argued here that Wikipedia can be a platform for archivists hoping to achieve this in some ways, but not in others.

Eveleigh’s work on ‘mapping the participatory landscape’ provides clarification.21 In this framework, an archivist editing Wikipedia articles with a view to promoting an archive collection is taking a ‘mechanistic’ approach. They are participating in the pre-existing Wikipedia community, with its own norms and objectives, and the archivist has no intention to build a separate community of interest specifically around their archive. This is quite different to more open-ended, or ‘organic,’ Wikipedia edit-a-thons, which could provide the foundations of a ‘collaborative community’ of archive users. Another interesting ‘frame’ that Eveleigh identifies is the ‘Archival Commons,’ which Anderson and Allen envisage as ‘a peer-based framework for the assembly, arrangement, and representation’ of archive collections.22 Archivists interested in making this seemingly distant vision a reality could perhaps utilize Wikipedia as part of the process.

Eveleigh notes that crowdsourcing, one of the most prominent forms of participation analysed in the archival literature, is ‘particularly associated with user involvement in archival description, transcription and metadata enhancement.’23 This contrasts with Wikipedia editing, which takes place in an environment separate from an archive’s own website and catalogue. Some – such as Shilton and Srinivasan, whose aims include ‘re-envisioning archival principles of appraisal, arrangement, and description to actively incorporate participation from traditionally marginalized communities’24 – therefore may not find Wikipedia engagement useful. For Huvila’s ‘radical user orientation’ projects, it would likewise be unsuitable.25 This reflects Flinn’s comment that ‘in themselves, new technologies do not guarantee’ a more democratic archival practice that empowers the ‘under-voiced.’26 But arguably most archivists who wish to adopt Archives 2.0 principles are unwilling or unable to take such a ‘radical’ approach. Wikipedia may be favoured because it is distinct from ‘authoritative’ finding aids created only by archivists. Some of the questions Yakel raises – ‘can archives remain trusted institutions if they share authority over the representation of records?’, for example – are thus negated.27 If this mindset leads archivists to choose Wikipedia over radical peer production that ‘impinges on, changes, and recontextualizes the records,’ we might ask, as Yakel does, ‘are we losing more in the long run?’28 Nonetheless, the fact that Wikipedia editing does not necessarily align itself with the most radical characterisations of Archives 2.0 is not a reason to shun it altogether.

**Outreach**

Another aspect of Archives 2.0, connected to both openness and participation, is ‘being where our users are’ – actively trying to attract new users, not just making collections open to those who would seek them out anyway. As Palmer shows, archivists cannot assume that ‘if we build it, they will come.’29 Eveleigh identifies ‘outreach and engagement’ as another form of participation, but one which has ‘much in common with traditional audience engagement and marketing initiatives, extended in reach and ambition by means of the internet.’30 This has important ramifications when it comes to Wikipedia.

Studies examining archivists’ use of various ‘Web 2.0’ sites suggest that this ‘marketing’ mindset predominates. Kriesberg’s analysis of 1880 tweets from 34 archival institutions shows over half consist of ‘administrative updates, links to institutional site content, and event promotion.’31 Griffin and Taylor find that ‘social media investment by special collections does not result in a significant level of interaction between departments and external constituents,’
and that ‘social media profiles tended to serve as one-way information conduits’ used ‘to advertise collections, events, and activities.’ Neither of these studies examined Wikipedia engagement. As indicated in the introduction, Wikipedia should be seen as distinct from the category ‘social media.’ But arguably concepts such as ‘Web 2.0’ and ‘social media’ are blurry and conflated in the minds of some archivists. Mason’s article, which does consider Wikipedia despite being titled ‘Outreach 2.0: Promoting Archives and Special Collections through Social Media,’ is perhaps indicative of this. It is therefore understandable why archivists, attracted by Wikipedia’s prominence and vast user base, might approach it with a view to enhancing outreach efforts. This context, and its disadvantages, informs the following analysis of Wikipedia-focussed case studies.

**Wikipedia-focussed literature**

Galloway and DellaCorte, authors of the most recent example, summarize in detail all earlier case studies written by archivists about their experience editing Wikipedia. This is therefore not repeated here. Instead, the case studies are analysed together thematically. Although all are by American university archivists, they present a broad spectrum of approaches to Wikipedia, allowing wider conclusions to be drawn.

**Motivations**

All the authors describe their primary aims in similar terms. Szajewski hoped to ‘raise the visibility of digitized historic sheet music assets.’ For Lally, being represented ‘where people engage in research has become increasingly important in a world of readily-accessible, distributed information.’ Such motivations clearly align themselves to Eveleigh’s ‘outreach and engagement’ frame.

Two case studies offer additional nuances. Combs explains:

Our motivation appears at first blush to be a selfish one: exposure … However, our actions also align with Point VI in the Society of American Archivists Code of Ethics: “Archivists strive to promote open and equitable access to their services and the records in their care without discrimination or preferential treatment … Archivists recognize their responsibility to promote the use of records as a fundamental purpose of the keeping of archives.”

As suggested earlier, Wikipedia editing can support Archives 2.0’s ‘openness’ agenda, as well as representing a means simply of promoting a service. Galloway and DellaCorte, meanwhile, aimed ‘to meet Wikipedia’s mission to improve the quality of the articles by adding content where necessary and substantially editing an article if called for.’ As the most recent authors to focus on this topic, they were able to learn from several previous case studies, and hoped to be ‘good Wikipedia citizens’ in order to avoid difficulties their predecessors faced. But there is also the sense that the ‘mission’ of Wikipedia, making knowledge available, somewhat aligns with the goals of an archive service, particularly one situated within the education sector. A 2012 blog post by Jo Pugh highlighting TNA’s work on Wikipedia shows similar sentiment:

We could pretend that inaccuracies and omissions on Wikipedia regarding our records are none of our business. But if we’re interested in working with, particularly young, audiences (and we are) we need to accept that Wikipedia is where they will be getting their information from. And that means it is our business and that if we can improve those articles, we should.
What archivists have done
There is more variation in the nature of each archive’s involvement with Wikipedia. The authors of the earliest case studies describe a process of determining well-represented subjects in their archival collections, finding relevant Wikipedia articles and adding links from them to their catalogues’ ‘fonds-level descriptions.’ Combs’ approach was similar, although as well as adding links she reports reviewing articles ‘for accuracy based on our research and holdings,’ and creating new articles in order to link them to collections. Szajewski also concentrated on the ‘External Links’ section of articles, although he limited the scope of his project to a single collection of digitized sheet music, linking relevant articles about particular songs, songwriters or lyricists to individual digitized items rather than entire collections.

Others, such as Elder et al., describe a different tack:

Originally, UHDS [the University of Houston Libraries Digital Services Department] intended to contribute exclusively to the External Links section of existing Wikipedia articles … As the UHDS pilot progressed, however, the emphasis changed … UHDS staff found it was much more effective to match digital items with Wikipedia articles and to share those items in Wikimedia Commons rather than (or in addition to) the External Links section of the articles.

This reflects Terras’ emphasis on the value of GLAMs making content openly available. Galloway and DellaCorte, meanwhile, hired student ‘interns’ to edit articles, thereby helping them better appreciate their collections and how to use them. No case studies explore archives’ experiences with WIRs or edit-a-thons, but the literature still highlights significant flexibility in how archives can work with Wikipedia.

Challenges
That said, several case studies highlight problems encountered by archivists whose approach could be described as ‘marketing.’ This stems from Wikipedia’s rule ‘Wikipedia is not a soapbox or means of promotion.’ Combs quotes excerpts from a lengthy debate amongst Wikipedia editors over allowing any links to archival finding aids on external websites. Some automatically considered them spam, and quickly removed them. The Wikipedia community subsequently amended its ‘Conflict of Interest’ policy to be more accommodating to archivists adding links to ‘uniquely relevant’ collections they manage. But ‘relevance’ is subjective, and Combs suggests that occasional removal of links ‘simply must be accepted’; if archivists ‘respect the spirit of the project by contributing content, not just links,’ they will build up ‘street cred,’ and their contributions will endure. Elder et al. place similar emphasis on this ‘balancing act.’ This is one of the key issues that archivists editing Wikipedia ought to be aware of. It has not been fully foregrounded before, however, and will be explored in more detail in the analysis section.

Galloway and DellaCorte highlight other challenges, connected with Wikipedia’s policies on original research and notability. There is insufficient space to examine these further here, but overall the case studies should not discourage any archivist from editing Wikipedia.

Judging success
All the case studies conclude on a highly encouraging note. Combs suggests that ‘in some ways, Wikipedia is the best thing to happen to manuscript collections in years.’ Several authors note that editing is free and enables archives to reach millions of potential users, including non-English speaking audiences, as links and content added to the English Wikipedia often reappear in Wikipedias in other languages. The importance of uploading
archival content to Wikimedia Commons to the objectives of the University of Houston’s Digital Library is evidenced by the decision to ‘formalize’ the pilot project and incorporate it into policies.53 Galloway and DellaCorte likewise report that archives staff will be trained ‘so that working in Wikipedia becomes a normal routine when processing collections and writing finding aids.’54

All the case study authors use server statistics to link their work on Wikipedia to significant increases in visits to their own online catalogues. Such indicators are undoubtedly valuable. Theimer declares in a blog post: ‘if we want to compete effectively and be taken seriously we have to roll up our sleeves and gather this kind of data.’55 But the case studies’ approach to evaluation contrasts with that shown in other studies of Web 2.0 and archives. Krause and Yakel, for example, describe a ‘multimethodological approach’ combining quantitative data collected through Web analytics with various qualitative methods.56 The latter are under-represented in the archival literature on Wikipedia, and the interviews conducted in the course of researching this article go some way towards addressing this. Smith-Yoshimura and Shein suggest that ‘the success of a Web 2.0 page cannot be measured by numbers alone … The quality of a user’s experience or contribution is a significant consideration, yet one that evades metrics.’57

One additional aspect, largely absent from the case studies but highlighted by Yakel, is the capability archivists have to improve the ‘authority’ of Wikipedia. In her analysis of Combs’ experience she argues:

By understanding the social system in Wikipedia, Combs and her colleagues at Syracuse University identified a means of working within Wikipedia’s social norms to integrate information about their collections into Wikipedia. As a result, the Syracuse University archivists have become a part of the social web in a way that the archives-generated sites have not.58

Wikipedia engagement can place archivists in the aforementioned role of ‘facilitator’ rather than ‘gatekeeper,’ sharing their authority rather than seeking to defend it. This contrasts with sites which allow user contributions but with archivists fully in control.59 The validity and implications of this idea are considered further in the analysis section.

**Summary**

The overall impression that arises from the literature is that Wikipedia engagement can be valuable for archivists seeking to achieve a wide range of goals, although not without disadvantages and obstacles. It is in keeping with the widely supported spirit of Archives 2.0. This helps to answer the question ‘should archivists edit Wikipedia?’ Some of its potential seems not to have been realized by the archive sector, arguably because it is not always approached in the most effective way. Although sometimes alluding to it, the literature does not fully explore this general question of how archivists should edit Wikipedia. This is therefore examined in greater detail in the analysis section, drawing upon data acquired through in-depth interviews. But first it is necessary to explain briefly the interview process.

**Methodology**

A total of six interviews were conducted. Four participants were WIRs (anonymized as W1, W2, W3 and W4), interviewed using Skype. Between them they have worked with public and private archive services of various sizes, and both as full-time employees and as freelance
consultants. One archivist (A1) who has edited Wikipedia in a professional capacity was interviewed in person. Finally, emailed responses to questions were received from a project officer at an archive service (A2) who has worked with a WIR. Although this sample size may seem small, the numbers of WIRs who have worked with archives and, seemingly, archive professionals who have worked on Wikipedia are themselves not vast. The analysis and conclusion show that broad themes and theories can still be drawn out from the interviews.

Although familiar with archives and archivists, the WIRs do not have archival backgrounds and are closely connected to the Wikimedia community. Their responses enable examination and expansion of ideas drawn out from the literature. The interviews with the two archive professionals provided something approximate to a ‘control,’ as the data gathered from interviewing them is compared with the impressions that arise from the case study literature written by other archivists, as well as with the responses from the WIRs. Although empirical details on what each participant did are valuable, their reflections on the spirit in which they did it are more so given this article’s theoretical focus. This, along with the reasons already mentioned, justifies choosing a methodology of in-depth interviewing.

Participants could read a list of potential questions beforehand, although the interviews were only semi-structured. The questions varied somewhat between interviews, particularly because some were more applicable to the WIRs’ experiences than those of the archive professionals, and vice versa. Detailed summaries of the interviews, not reproduced here due to insufficient space, were produced and approved by each participant. A consent form addressing research ethics was signed by each participant before their interview, which included a clause noting that respondents would not be individually identifiable.

Analysis

Two key findings emerged clearly from the interview data. Firstly, all interviewees, both WIRs and archive professionals, are either fairly or very enthusiastic about the possibilities Wikipedia can offer many archives. This was perhaps to be expected, and there was some disagreement as to whether every single archive has something to contribute, linked to the notability issue noted in the literature review. But no interviewee felt strongly that particular types of archives were more or less suited to working with Wikipedia. Secondly, the interview data attested to the ‘flexibility’ which archives can find in Wikipedia, also mentioned in the literature review. Participants variously focussed on the value of uploading content to Wikimedia, edit-a-thons, and encouraging individual users to edit articles based on their research in the archives.

More attention is now given to the second question this article addresses: how should archivists engage with Wikipedia? The interview data suggest their approach should be informed by clearer appreciation of the goals of the Wikipedia community. The fundamental message that emerges is the importance both archivists and members of the Wikimedia community ought to place on ensuring that they collaborate in a balanced manner. As the literature review shows, some case studies hint at this, but there is deeper examination here. The conclusion then draws out the wider significance and implications of this analysis.
Understanding the Wikipedians’ position

The WIRs were unsurprisingly lukewarm towards the idea that archivists might only add links to articles, leaving the rest of their content unimproved. None noted that archivists or other GLAM professionals do this less now than in the past, despite the case study literature showing that it was first questioned several years ago. A key reason why WIRs are not enthused by the prospect of archivists focusing solely on adding links to Wikipedia stems from a concern that Wikipedia is missing out on the often highly specialized knowledge of archives’ staff, users and unique content. Wikipedians are frustrated by what they see as a ‘lack of imagination,’ as W3 put it, not by fundamental opposition towards the notion that archives may be receiving some promotional benefit. W3 emphasized that although Wikipedia is not a ‘guide to the web,’ some links – including those added by archivists – clearly ought to be on Wikipedia. When dealing with archivists W2 highlights increased visibility as an incentive for them. W1 sees ‘tension’ inherent in the WIR’s role, who represents Wikipedia’s interests but may also be a paid employee of an institution with an archive, and so is obliged to do work that is in some sense ‘promotional.’

Reshaping how archivists view Wikipedia

This clearer understanding of what the Wikipedia community wants from archivists should shape their approach. It reemphasizes that Wikipedia is distinct from social media, challenging the notion that it can be ‘used’ by archivists like Facebook or Twitter, which authors such as Crymble call social media ‘tools.’ The literature review noted that an ‘External Links’-focused approach was more likely to encounter difficulties, and W3 likewise claims archivists who choose it ‘[set] themselves up for a bad experience.’ It is notable, then, that A1 calls Wikipedia a ‘useful tool’ which could be ‘harnessed’ to produce a ‘quick win’ in the form of adding links to A1’s cataloguing. This partly resulted from time constraints. A1 had several other duties, such as cataloguing and blogging, alongside Wikipedia editing. Many archivists who may be interested in Wikipedia doubtless find themselves in a similar position. Though this issue may be unavoidable, and was highlighted repeatedly in the interviews with the WIRs, Wikipedia does have the advantage that archivists can work on it as and when time permits rather than at regular intervals, with little discernible impact on the outcome. Here again it differs from social media, which often carries an expectation from users of frequent new content. Archivists could also save time and engage volunteers by encouraging them or other users to edit.

The inclination of archivists such as A1 to ‘use’ Wikipedia as a ‘tool’ seems to relate to questions surrounding their ‘authority.’ A1’s concern, which archivists’ managers and users may well share, about others ‘tampering’ with ‘definitive’ content created by archivists is valid. But it may also represent a missed opportunity. Archivists could, instead, see their contributions as ‘lending the authority of [their] institution to Wikipedia,’ thereby making it more authoritative. This requires some culture change, which can be slow; Duff and Haskell suggest that archivists have an ‘aversion to decentralized control’ which ‘may derive from [their] primary duty and obligation to preserve the authenticity and integrity of records … traditionally linked to bureaucratic control and neutral custodianship of records.’ But the interview data suggest that this change makes deeper engagement with Wikipedia seem more worthwhile. A2, for example, comments:
Some people still cling to the idea that knowledge can only be external and fixed and held by experts … I think that’s what causes tension, as you create or edit something on Wikipedia and immediately relinquish control of it. I think our input as a sector would greatly enhance the accuracy of the resource though. Community created knowledge doesn’t at all replace expertise … but if the two work together the whole is better than the sum of its parts.

Arguably, the Wikipedia community’s interest in archives lies more in accessing their unique content and databases, and less in archivists’ ‘expertise’ or ‘authority.’ Some WIRs did not highlight the latter prominently when interviewed. But W3 suggests in the context of edit-a-thons that although archivists ‘do not have the final say on what gets created,’ they fulfil the role of ‘experts on the subject people have come to learn about.’ Their status as the ‘curator of knowledge becomes, if anything, more important.’

This can be located in the wider context of the archival profession rethinking the importance of authority. The idea of archivists as sole experts is diminishing, but ‘expertise’ still has a role to play in a more participatory future, Flinn argues:

Whilst the accuracy and reliability of collaborative projects like Wikipedia remain controversial and debated, many studies suggest that it is not wildly inaccurate compared with traditional sources or, perhaps more importantly, that it necessarily excludes expert views or scholarship. In fact the significant point seems to be that most entries in these models are created by experts in their particular field and then maintained by larger numbers of less specialist gardeners. For those who advocate the democratising potential of these developments, prospects for change and transformation perhaps lie not so much with the idea of the ‘crowd’ but that the experts are drawn from a much broader, less elitist notion of where knowledge and expertise can be found.

Based on the interview data, archivists should acknowledge that they are not the only holders of ‘authority’ on Wikipedia, without feeling that their ‘authority’ counts for nothing. The Wikipedia community values it because they link it to knowledge.

**Determining how archivists should engage with Wikipedia**

The key notion emerging here is ‘balance.’ W1 emphasized the need for a relationship that ‘benefits both sides’ based on ‘give and take’ or ‘quid pro quo,’ where archives receive greater visibility in exchange for improving Wikipedia’s comprehensiveness and quality. There should be ‘collaboration,’ instead of archives viewing Wikipedia as a ‘tool’ – or indeed vice versa. Rather than holding back, archivists should consider deeper involvement if time and managerial support allow. Although adding links back to their catalogues can be worthwhile for both archivists and Wikipedia, editing articles, uploading content to Wikimedia Commons or investigating Wikidata may be more valuable still. W1 suggests that more information on a subject and related digitized content added can ‘entice’ more people to be interested in it and follow links from Wikipedia articles to relevant collections. This resembles Terras’ ‘virtuous circle.’ The main body of a Wikipedia article can highlight what a relevant archival collection comprises, not just its existence. The benefits of more substantial editing are not, therefore, limited only to an increased likelihood that links at the end of articles are not removed. The interviews demonstrate this more forcefully than the case study literature.

W3 argues more directly that engaging with Wikipedia can involve ‘marketing’ archives in more than just the sense of ‘boosting their visibility’:

As the sector responds to competitive pressures, these institutions have become more canny about marketing, but they’ve interpreted ‘marketing’ in a way that owes a lot to the commercial ethos: colourful brochures, consistent branding, social media, and so on. This kind of marketing
can put the logo and stock photos out front, while leaving the experts in a back room. A very different view of marketing is that the uniqueness of the collections and subject expertise should be used to market these institutions. Co-operation with Wikipedia is about inverting that conception of marketing: whether it’s by sharing content and metadata, or putting on a public event, we put ‘back room’ subject experts in the spotlight.

This message should encourage archivists to feel that by collaborating with Wikipedia in a more in-depth, equal manner, they – and Wikipedia – stand to benefit more than if they engage wholly on their own terms. It is worth noting again how W3 distinguishes Wikipedia engagement from social media, which is linked to a ‘commercial’ approach to marketing. Archivists should not see deeper engagement as a necessary evil, something they do only to build up what Combs calls ‘street cred’.65

Nor should, as W1 notes, either side feel they are acting out of ‘goodwill’ or ‘charity’. There are undoubtedly similarities between the overarching aims of Wikipedia and many archive services, understood on the broad level of making knowledge and content available to as wide an audience as possible. But other mutual benefits are more tangible. Putting digitized material onto Wikimedia Commons is not giving it away for ‘nothing’ if the archive desires increased visibility in return. W4 emphasizes the importance of archives ‘branding’ the content they upload, so users who click on it clearly see where it has come from. W2 recalls that the results of making images freely available for reuse ‘staggered’ some archivists. Both they and others who saw the impact became ‘excited about sharing more content’ because it brings exposure, and sought to embed it in everyday policy. Focusing on the idea of collaboration based on equal exchange helps to demonstrate the value for archives in making content freely available under an open licence, as well as engaging in editing.

Conclusion

This article presents quantitative and qualitative evidence strongly indicating that it is worthwhile for many, if not all, archivists to engage with Wikipedia, emphasizing how this engagement aligns with archival ethics and Archives 2.0 and is supported by case studies, server statistics and the interview data. At the same time, following Flinn’s advice mentioned in the introduction, the article takes a critical approach to the literature and interview data in order not to overstate the possibilities Wikipedia can offer archives.

The analysis section examined how archivists should go about realizing this potential. This is an area that the sector is less certain about. Comparison of just two interviews, those with A1 and A2, indicates that professionals’ attitudes towards Wikipedia are varied. Based on analysis of all the interview data, this study has firstly suggested that archivists need awareness of the aims of the Wikipedia community, centred around making knowledge and content freely available. It helps them appreciate why, although most Wikipedians accept that archivists engage with Wikimedia projects with some promotional or marketing intentions, viewing Wikipedia as a promotional ‘tool’, akin to social media, can be problematic. It also shows that the Wikipedia community’s knowledge focus means that archivists’ authority, while not pre-eminent, is still important. The section then highlighted the importance of engaging collaboratively rather than ‘using’ Wikipedia.

There are significant conclusions in themselves. Wikipedia may or may not become part of many archivists’ everyday activity, but it is unlikely to disappear. This article will now
therefore sketch out some practical recommendations, before ending with broader theoretical conclusions drawn from the analysis.

**Recommendations**

A key issue that emerged while researching this article is the lack of general guidance from within the archive sector showing archivists why and how they might consider engaging with Wikipedia, particularly in a UK context. This is compounded by the fact that the majority of the profession will likely never work with a WIR, even on a short-term basis. Although overall numbers of WIRs are increasing, the interview with W4 in particular highlighted that the focus of Wikimedia UK is moving towards working with larger institutions, particularly in the education sector. There may therefore be less direct or prolonged contact between archive professionals and WIRs. Duff and Haskell, who investigate various collaborative projects and methods to facilitate access, but not Wikipedia, argue:

> The profession needs to develop a statement of principles to help archives flourish in this new terrain. Archivists need guidance on making records available online, using records in games, promoting remixes of their records, and participating in crowdsourcing projects. The Code of Ethics provides broad guidelines on issues of access and privacy, but the profession needs to ponder and debate these concerns and develop guidelines to assist archivists who make records available online, especially those made available for modification and augmentation using social media technologies or in crowdsourcing or gamification projects … A statement of principles should also provide guidance on how to deal with the content contributed by participants. What value are archivists ascribing to these voices, and how should archival systems manage them?66

This applies to working with Wikipedia too. ARA or TNA could provide direction in this area, perhaps by highlighting a range of UK case studies, as the Museums Association has done.67 More generally, archivists could note how other GLAM institutions have responded to the opportunities and challenges presented by working with Wikipedia. This could be done through partnerships and networking, as well as reading literature written for a non-archival audience. Recently, for example, a WIR contributed a piece to a museum-focused journal arguing that ‘issues of democratization, voice, and authority in museums can be addressed through Wikipedia’s community, process, and its potential as a model for a new Open Authority in museums.’68 Although archivists appreciate the differences between the professions, literature such as this with a more widely applicable message and the interviews conducted for this study suggest that these differences may be less important when it comes to working with Wikipedia.

Future research could investigate qualitatively what archive users think about archives engaging with Wikipedia. It could be that ‘regulars’ would suggest the required effort could better be expended on more detailed cataloguing, but newer or more casual users might be more appreciative. There should also be further investigation into how Wikipedia might modify its policies or outreach activities in order to foster a more productive relationship with a wider range of archives. More practically, archives could trial events which combine Wikipedia edit-a-thons and direct editing of or commenting on archival finding aids. This could enable both archive services and Wikipedia to obtain substantial content. Finally, it is important that archives do not limit their attention just to Wikipedia. The WIRs interviewed were keen to discuss Wikidata in particular, and its potential to enable catalogues from different institutions to become increasingly interlinked, not just gathered together as is currently done on other sites.
**Wider conclusions**

The broader implications of this study with respect to Archives 2.0 may not be immediately obvious, but some important ideas do present themselves. One the one hand, Archives 2.0 might be criticized as a disorganized assortment of concepts, and by suggesting that archivists’ engagement with Wikipedia embodies several of these different strands it may seem that this article prevents a unified conclusion from emerging. Perhaps neither really helps one to understand the other on a deeper level, beyond the impression that they seem to cohere to a significant extent. On the other hand, by foregrounding the importance of collaboration it does become possible to see a wider significance of archivists’ work on Wikipedia. This goes some way towards filling the gap in the previous literature on the subject, which as has been shown is significantly more practical than theoretical in its focus.

Although Wikipedia is a decentralized, participatory project, this study suggests that archivists’ engagement with it cannot – at least in many cases – be located at the most radical end of the Archives 2.0 scale. It does not involve user-produced cataloguing – users are not directly involved at all necessarily. Archivists’ authority is still somewhat preserved, and there is still emphasis on promotion, although not in the sense of ‘using’ a ‘tool’. As Palmer and Stevenson note:

> Web 2.0 gives us the opportunity to think not just about promoting our collections through online and traditional finding aids but also about working to present them more imaginatively – to engage in dialogue and build communities around archives.69

It is possible to suggest, then, that collaboration is desirable because it enables Archives 2.0-type goals to be met more effectively, but is not inherently transformative in every case. Collaboration is a concept that is not separate from promotion; it can support it. ‘Outreach’ does not have to be achieved only through ‘tools.’ The very fact that Wikipedia engagement casts the archivist in the role of collaborator in a larger project that they do not control is significant. Compared to a participatory archives website, where archivists oversee users who can only tag or comment on finding aids that the archivists create and manage, the relationship between archivists who edit Wikipedia and the wider Wikipedia community is significantly more equal. Archivists and users who work together on Wikipedia, either in edit-a-thons or more informally, thereby both move closer to the status of ‘peer collaborators’ – the status that Palmer argues users ought to have, ‘intrinsic to the process of meaning-making, rather than outside interlopers (however welcome) who must be kept at arm’s length from the authoritative record.’ The fact that archivists themselves become ‘peer collaborators’ might demonstrate to their users that they are not purely interested in an imbalanced model of participation done on the archivists’ own terms. It could also be a step towards a more radical participatory archive, getting archivists to change their view of this concept which has until now perhaps appeared more prominently in literature than reality. Collaboration is arguably a key concept for unifying the strands of Archives 2.0, and analysing archives’ engagement with Wikipedia helps to demonstrate how this is so.

Taking this view may be significant not only in the context of today and Archives 2.0 but also looking further ahead towards the semantic web, or Web 3.0, and a possible ‘Archives 3.0.’ Wikipedia is likely to remain potentially valuable for archives for the foreseeable future, and perhaps increasingly so, but future developments must be closely monitored.
Notes

1. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About.
2. Jemielniak and Albar, “Bridging the Gap,” 1773–6.
3. Theimer, Web 2.0 Tools and Strategies, 10.
4. See https://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/FAQ/en.
5. See https://outreach.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikipedian_in_Residence.
6. Flinn, “An Attack on Professionalism and Scholarship?”
7. International Council on Archives, “Principles of Access.”
8. Archives & Records Association, “Code of Ethics.”
9. Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism,” 18.
10. Theimer, “What Is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?” 68.
11. Ibid., 60.
12. Theimer, “Archivists and Audiences,” 335.
13. Palmer, “Archives 2.0”; Flinn, “An Attack on Professionalism and Scholarship?”
14. Theimer, “Archivists and Audiences,” 336.
15. Terras, “Opening Access to Collections,” 733–52.
16. The National Archives, “Archives for the 21st Century in Action.”
17. See https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Licensing.
18. Duff and Harris, “Stories and Names,” 279.
19. Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community,” 113.
20. Theimer, “Archivists and Audiences,” 338–9.
21. Eveleigh, “Crowding out the Archivist?” 211–29.
22. Anderson and Allen, “Envisioning the Archival Commons,” 383–400.
23. Eveleigh, “Crowding out the Archivist?” 211.
24. Shilton and Srinivasan, “Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement,” 90.
25. Huvila, “Participatory Archive,” 15–36.
26. Flinn, “An Attack on Professionalism and Scholarship?”
27. Yakel, “Balancing Archival Authority,” 83.
28. Ibid., 89.
29. Palmer, “Archives 2.0.”
30. Eveleigh, “Crowding out the Archivist?” 220.
31. Kriesberg, “Increasing Access,” 545.
32. Griffin and Taylor, “Of Fans, Friends, and Followers,” 255–71.
33. Mason, “Outreach 2.0,” 157–68.
34. Galloway and DellaCorte, “Increasing the Discoverability of Digital Collections,” 85–7.
35. Szajewski, “Using Wikipedia to Enhance the Visibility.”
36. Lally, “Using Wikipedia to Highlight Digital Collections.”
37. Combs, “Wikipedia as an Access Point,” 140.
38. Galloway and DellaCorte, “Increasing the Discoverability of Digital Collections,” 88.
39. See http://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/blog/is-that-all-there-is/.
40. Lally and Dunford, “Using Wikipedia to Extend Digital Collections”; Lally, “Using Wikipedia to Highlight Digital Collections”; Belden, “Harnessing Social Networks”; Pressley and McCallum, “Putting the Library in Wikipedia.”
41. Combs, “Wikipedia as an Access Point,” 140.
42. Szajewski, “Using Wikipedia to Enhance the Visibility.”
43. Elder, Westbrook and Reilly, “Wikipedia Lover, Not a Hater,” 34.
44. Galloway and DellaCorte, “Increasing the Discoverability of Digital Collections,” 88.
45. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What_Wikipedia_is_not#Wikipedia_is_not_a_soapbox_or_means_of_promotion.
46. Combs, “Wikipedia as an Access Point,” 143–5.
47. A blog post by a WIR gives further details: see https://wittylama.com/2009/10/02/conflict-of-interest-archives/.
48. Combs, “Wikipedia as an Access Point,” 146.
49. Elder, Westbrook, and Reilly, “Wikipedia Lover, Not a Hater,” 39.
50. Galloway and DellaCorte, “Increasing the Discoverability of Digital Collections,” 90.
51. Combs, “Wikipedia as an Access Point,” 140.
52. Lally and Dunford, “Using Wikipedia to Extend Digital Collections”; Combs, “Wikipedia as an Access Point”; Elder, Westbrook, and Reilly, “Wikipedia Lover, Not a Hater.”
53. Elder, Westbrook and Reilly, “Wikipedia Lover, Not a Hater,” 44.
54. Galloway and DellaCorte, “Increasing the Discoverability of Digital Collections,” 95.
55. See http://archivesnext.com/?p=203.
56. Krause and Yakel, “Interaction in Virtual Archives,” 287.
57. Smith-Yoshimura and Shein, “Social Metadata for Libraries.”
58. Yakel, “Balancing Archival Authority,” 85.
59. A prominent example was TNA’s Your Archives, which used Wikipedia’s MediaWiki software to allow users to edit articles linked to its catalogue until its closure in 2012 (see http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Home page). Its replacement, Discovery, retains a ‘tagging’ feature.
60. Crymble “An Analysis of Twitter and Facebook Use,” 129.
61. Yakel, “Balancing Archival Authority,” 86.
62. Duff and Haskell, “New Uses for Old Records,” 52.
63. Flinn, “An Attack on Professionalism and Scholarship?”
64. Terras, “Opening Access to Collections,” 734.
65. Combs, “Wikipedia as an Access Point,” 146.
66. Duff and Haskell, “New Uses for Old Records,” 55.
67. See https://www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/wikipedia.
68. Phillips, “The Temple and the Bazaar,” 219.
69. Palmer and Stevenson, “Something Worth Sitting Still For?” 18.
70. Palmer, “Archives 2.0.”

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