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ATG Interviews Phoebe Ayers

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by **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

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ATG: *In July 2010 you were selected to the Wikimedia Foundation Board of Trustees. That might be considered quite a coup for a librarian. How long have you been active in the Wikimedia Community? How did you get your start? What would you recommend to other librarians who are interested in making a “splash” in the Wikimedia community?*

PA: I began editing the English-language **Wikipedia** back in 2003, when the site was not nearly as well-known as it is now — **Wikipedia** was founded in 2001, and it took a couple years for it to reach a critical mass (now it’s a top-five Website!) I immediately fell in love with the project and its promise, and was also fascinated by the social dynamics of **Wikipedia** as an information resource: both why people edit and use **Wikipedia**, and that the big questions of information authority and how we know what we know are issues that **Wikipedia** editors grapple with on a daily basis.

Over the years I became more involved with the **Wikimedia Foundation**, which is the non-profit organization that runs **Wikipedia** and its sister projects. We have an annual international conference, “**Wikimania**,” which I have now helped organize on five continents. That has enabled me to meet **Wikipedians** from all over the world, which has been a very rewarding experience. In 2010 I ran for a seat on the **Wikimedia Foundation** Board of Trustees, and was chosen for a two-year term in a community selection process. Our Board has ten seats in total; five of them are selected by our editing community.

For librarians, there are many ways to get involved in **Wikipedia**. There is a lot of momentum right now behind projects that we are loosely calling “**GLAM**” work — partnerships with Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums — such as inviting **Wikipedians** to have a residency or internship in a cultural institution to improve articles related to it. There have also been many projects where librarians have directly edited and improved **Wikipedia** articles, or contributed archival materials to the **Wikimedia Commons**, our online free photo repository. There is also a big opportunity for librarians to do outreach work. One of the wonderful things about **Wikipedia** is it is such an open project — no one ever assigned me the work of helping organize our conference, for instance; I just decided to help out, and it became a passion for me. Anyone can just dive in, if they have time and inclination.

ATG: *Would you comment on Jimmy Wales and your professional involvement with him? Were you involved with Wikipedia from the beginning? Did Jimmy ask you to join the*

effort? Did y’all have similar attitudes and wishes for the project?

PA: Well, as I mentioned above I became involved in **Wikipedia** a couple of years after it was founded. I didn’t even know who **Jimmy Wales** was at that time, and I didn’t have any interactions with him until many years later, when we met in the context of our annual conference. While **Jimmy** does meet hundreds of **Wikipedians** every year, that’s still only a small fraction of the overall number of **Wikipedia** contributors. **Jimmy**’s leadership was established not because he personally met or recruited editors — **Jimmy** himself didn’t meet a group of **Wikipedians** in person until 2004, three years after **Wikipedia** started! — but because of the work he and other early contributors did to establish core principles and the project’s tone. These guidelines, policies and principles include some of the core tenets of the project, such as free content, neutrality and friendliness to new editors, that attracted me and many other people to the project. **Jimmy** and I are currently colleagues on the Board of Trustees, and it has been great to work with him.

ATG: *When Wikipedia began did you have a business plan? Did you project expenses and operating costs? Please tell us about the planning process before and after Wikipedia and Wikimedia began.*

PA: **Wikipedia** was really an experiment starting out — it was originally envisioned as part of another encyclopedia project, **Nupedia**, that subsequently failed — and after being put online the growth of **Wikipedia** proceeded to absolutely blow everyone’s expectations away. I don’t think anyone who was there at the beginning imagined that **Wikipedia** would become anything like what it is today. So no, there was no business plan at the beginning. That’s where the nonprofit **Wikimedia Foundation** came in, a couple of years after **Wikipedia** was founded — the **Foundation**’s goal was to provide a safe, stable and non-commercial home for the funding and upkeep of the project, which was clearly beginning to get huge. The plan for the **Foundation** was developed by **Jimmy Wales** and other volunteers who were involved in the project, and costs were covered by donations — as they are today.

ATG: *For the uninitiated can you explain the relationship between the Wikimedia Foundation and Wikipedia the online encyclopedia that millions of us use daily?*

PA: The **Wikimedia Foundation** is the legal non-profit organization that hosts **Wikipedia**. We have a small staff based in San Francisco that runs the servers for the site, maintains

the software (**MediaWiki**) that **Wikipedia** runs on, and does other support work like running the annual fundraiser and providing legal support. But the **Wikimedia Foundation** does not have a hand in the content of **Wikipedia** — that is entirely generated and maintained by our all-volunteer editing community. There is no editorial board or anything like that. And though we are based in San Francisco, we have chapters in 33 countries — these are independent organizations in their respective geographies that aim to support the **Wikimedia** mission. With projects in 270 languages and chapters on every continent (except Antarctica), we are truly a global organization.

ATG: *Can you comment on the money that it takes to run Wikipedia? Wikimedia Foundation? Do you have a budget to work with? Do you work largely off of contributions and/or grants?*

PA: Funding for **Wikimedia** comes almost entirely from donations, primarily small donations from individuals who give money during our annual fundraising campaign (you’ll see the banners on **Wikipedia** in the fall). In other words, **Wikipedia** is funded by its readers, and we depend on that support. We do also get a few grants from educational foundations. This year, we raised \$16 million, with an average donation size of about \$35. That money goes towards all of the programs of the **Wikimedia Foundation**, including paying for the hosting and technical maintenance of **Wikipedia**.

ATG: *Please comment on your international operation. What are the 33 countries that you are working with? Into which countries do you plan to expand? Do you have a similar set up in terms of articles, contributors, etc., in other countries that you have in the U.S.?*

PA: Chapters currently exist in the following countries: Argentina, Austria, Australia, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Hong Kong, Hungary, Indonesia, Israel, India, Italy, Macedonia, Macau, Netherlands, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Russia, Sweden, Taiwan, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States (New York City), South Africa, and Canada.

Of course we’d love to see more chapters — that’s up to the volunteer communities in those countries, however. Chapters are founded and run by volunteers, and they are independent entities. Volunteers don’t need any approval from the **Foundation** to self-organize into interest or meetup groups — in fact there are hundreds of small groups of editors around the

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world that meet up regularly and do outreach activities — but if such a group decides to become a chapter, which is a legally-recognized nonprofit organization that uses the **Wikimedia** name, then they would work with us.

The **Wikipedia** projects, the different language editions, are totally separate from this structure — all **Wikipedia** editions are hosted by the U.S.-based **Wikimedia Foundation**. Most editors are not affiliated with any particular group, no matter what country they live in or language they use.

ATG: *As you know there are still librarians and publishers who criticize Wikipedia for its perceived lack of quality control, vandalism, etc. Is that a fair criticism? Have there been changes that make many of these concerns ill founded? Would our energy be better spent trying to help improve Wikipedia? Why? What is the benefit to the library community?*

PA: One of the things that it's important to intuitively understand about **Wikipedia** is that it's uneven. Some articles are great; some are terrible. That's not a secret — but it means that both blanket criticism and blanket praise are somewhat misplaced. (Of course, one of the hidden aspects of many traditional reference works is that they are also uneven, with articles updated at different times). Overall, our quality control mechanisms — mainly, the many members of our core editing community that are keeping an eye on changes to articles — have worked extraordinarily well considering the extremely rapid growth of **Wikipedia** over the years. But it still is important to bring a critical eye to **Wikipedia** as a reader, checking the article history if you think an article has been vandalized, checking citation quality, and so on.

We are constantly experimenting with new things. For several years there have been automated tools on **Wikipedia**, sort of like the spam filters on your email, that keep out the majority of blatant vandalism; it is quite rare for this kind of damage to stick for very long in an article these days. We are currently piloting a “reader ratings” system, so that readers can rate articles and submit comments; this will hopefully get more people involved in the editorial process and give us a new way to flag low-quality articles. But the best thing we can do to keep quality up is to bring in more high-quality editors to improve and maintain articles.

So yes, I do think it's worthwhile for librarians to help edit **Wikipedia**. We have the skills and tools at our disposal to improve any **Wikipedia** article. The benefit to us is that our patrons — our students, clients, and the public at large — are using **Wikipedia** to find information. In libraries, we have a mission to deliver the highest-quality, most relevant information to our patrons about whatever they are looking for — and a really good **Wikipedia** article that is correct, up to date, and well-referenced is a great mechanism for reaching

even those patrons that won't come directly to us, for whatever reason. Editing **Wikipedia** has more of an impact than any other single thing we can do as a professional. Even the least-trafficked article will be seen thousands of times by people all over the world; highly-read articles might be seen millions of times.

ATG: *You mention a “core editing community.” Is that a formal group? How does one become a member? How does it work? Are people assigned to cover specific subject areas?*

PA: Very few things on **Wikipedia** involve formal groups! I am simply using this term as shorthand to refer to the people who spend a lot of time and energy working on **Wikipedia** — the people who affiliate themselves with the project. In general when it comes to editing content we don't assign anyone to do anything; tasks get done (or not) because someone decides to step up and do it.

ATG: *You mention in your Wikipedia profile that “referencing is my true love.” By that you mean adding references to print sources for Wikipedia articles, enhancing their bibliographies. Correct? Do you see that as one way librarians can most effectively impact Wikipedia? Are there other contributions that librarians can make that will enhance the value of Wikipedia articles?*

PA: That's right. As librarians we are in this wonderful position of having much more access to good, authoritative sources than the average person, and certainly much more so than underserved populations around the world who might not have access to a library at all. We are also all well-trained in coming up with references about anything in short order, without necessarily being subject-matter experts. The majority of **Wikipedia** articles can use more citations, whether it's links to authoritative handbooks under “further reading” or footnotes to back up claimed facts. There's nothing magical about this process — it just takes people who really like to dig through bibliographic resources to find good citations, which I think describes most librarians! And there are a lot of interesting tools that you can use for citations on **Wikipedia**; for instance, the booksources tool that automatically links an ISBN number to a special page where a reader can choose to search **Worldcat**, a national library catalog, or an online bookseller to find a copy of the book near them. There's also a lot of tidying up to do that you can start with, if you are hesitant about editing **Wikipedia** — for instance, adding ISBN numbers to citations for books, making sure bibliographies in articles about authors are complete, and so on.

As I said, there's many other ways librarians could get involved too. Institutionally, freeing up archival materials by digitizing them and releasing them under a free license is one exciting type of work that's happening. And support of open access helps **Wikipedia** as well; since **Wikipedia** editors aren't necessarily affiliated with institutions that can afford expensive subscriptions, anything that's open access is likely to be disproportionately represented in **Wikipedia** — and therefore have quite a bit of traffic driven to it.

ATG: *Have there been active attempts to recruit librarians or their institutions as volunteers? Say through ALA, ACRL, PLA or other library associations?*

PA: Well, I and others have given talks encouraging it! But there haven't been any formal efforts by library associations to encourage working on **Wikipedia** that I know of. Volunteer **Wikimedia** groups have worked with some libraries, certainly, but we don't have a formal program to do so. In some other professional organizations, most recently the **Association for Psychological Science**, members of that organization who were passionate about helping to improve **Wikipedia** have called on their colleagues to volunteer; and that's the kind of effort that's really most effective (you can see their project here: <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/members/aps-wikipedia-initiative>). That kind of initiative would be really great to see in our professional organizations as well.

ATG: *The Wikimedia Foundation also supports so-called “Sister Projects” in addition to Wikipedia. What are some of the most exciting of these “Sister Projects?” Are there roles for librarians (or possibly publishers) in any of these projects?*

PA: We have eight sister projects: **Wiktionary** (a free dictionary); **Wikimedia Commons** (a free photo repository); **Wikibooks** (free textbooks); **Wikisource** (source texts, such as historical materials); **Wikiversity** (for development of learning and curricular materials); **Wikinews** (citizen journalism); **Wikiquote** (a free quotations dictionary); and **Wikispecies** (taxonomic species information). **MediaWiki**, the open-source wiki software that all of the other projects run on, is the ninth project that we run.

Many of these projects are quite a bit smaller and have a lot of unexplored potential. All of them are interesting for librarians, though the first five I list might be most directly relevant for librarians and publishers. For example, **Commons** is where photos end up, including several large donations from national libraries that we have received. **Wikisource** has the text of public-domain documents like the Constitution, and the French-language **Wikisource** just entered a partnership with the **French National Library** to receive a large donation of digitized public domain texts of this type. In turn, the library receives the efforts of the **Wikisource** volunteer community, who will correct the OCR'd scans and produce plain-text versions of the documents. This is a very exciting type of partnership that we hope to see more of.

ATG: *As it has grown the Wikimedia Foundation has added more paid “professional” staff. Is there a danger that the volunteer ethos that has contributed so much to Wikipedia's success will be lost? How is this growth of professional staff affecting the Foundation and its work?*

PA: This has been an area of debate for many years in our community; however, as I noted all editorial work, such as writing **Wikipedia** articles, is done by volunteers, not by staff. In areas where both staff and volunteers

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do similar tasks — for instance, we have many volunteers that do outreach and press support, and we also have a small team of people at the **Foundation** who answer press inquiries — we have a culture of working together quite closely, with shared issue tracking systems, mailing lists, and so on. A large amount of “**Foundation**” work is actually done by volunteer community members, and there is an expectation of transparency and public sharing of information that would be quite radical for many organizations — but we just think of it as the **Wikimedia** way.

The **Foundation** has grown from a shoestring organization with no paid staff at the beginning, to now having around 70 employees, but we still feel that we're barely scraping the surface of what could be done. For a long time, our staff has just scaled to meet the increased technical needs of the projects as they have grown; we are just now beginning to explore doing more outreach work at the **Foundation**. Our vision is “Imagine a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge” — that's pretty ambitious. And we are well aware that **Wikimedia** only exists because of the work done by the multi-faceted, international volunteer community — the community is the heart and soul of our movement.

ATG: *Can we expect an update of your book “How Wikipedia Works” any time soon?*

PA: I would love to at some point, but I don't have any plans (or any time) to update it right now — however, the book is released under the GFDL, which is a free license, so other people are certainly welcome to update it! In addition to my book, there are other newer educational materials available at <http://bookshelf.wikimedia.org>.

ATG: *If you had a crystal ball, where would you see Wikipedia and the Wikimedia Foundation in five years? What would you see your role as then?*

PA: We just completed a strategic planning project that mapped out the direction for the next five years of the **Wikimedia Foundation** and movement, through 2015; this was a massive community effort, with a thousand community members contributing to building the plan. So coming out of that, our goal for the next five years is to radically increase our

editing community, particular in areas that are currently underrepresented — for instance, we want to get more female editors, and more editors that are from parts of the world where large portions of the population are newly online, such as India and Brazil.

More editors will lead, we hope, to increasing articles in languages where there are millions of native speakers, but comparatively very little material online (and where the **Wikipedia** version is still small), such as Hindi and Arabic. More articles means more readers means more editors — it's a virtuous circle. And finally, we want to increase article quality across all languages.

In five years, I hope that everyone will not only *use* **Wikipedia**, but will think of it as a living project that they participate in, have a stake in, and can make better. With the growth of **Wikipedia** over the last ten years, I have been privileged to have been a part of one of the most extraordinary social movements and reference projects to ever exist, and I would love to share that with everyone. 🌱

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Ghana (that's the title on the title page; the title on the cover is *Directory of libraries and library personnel in Ghana*) published by the **Ghana Library Association** in 2004. She

had a copy on ILL but wanted her own copy to mark up. After countless emails, the miracle worker **Digby Sales** (University of Cape Town) <Digby.Sales@uct.ac.za> magically located a copy even though he had said it was difficult sourcing material out of Africa north of South Africa. Thank you, **Digby!**

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