WIKIPEDIA FOR AFRICANISTS

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Introduction

How can Africanists and information specialists in African research and documentation get the most out of Wikipedia, and how can they contribute to Wikipedia? This article argues that Wikipedia is useful both as a universally accessible – albeit not specifically academic – free reference tool and as a channel for outreach to disseminate sourced academic and non-academic information. The 'African Studies' article on the English-language Wikipedia provides some slightly dubious definitions but also gives a useful hyperlinked list of notable Africanists, institutions and degree courses. But not all the so-called 'notable' Africanists and institutions mentioned are in truth very notable (or are they: John Frank Clarke and Antumi Toasijé?). One of the pitfalls of Wikipedia, namely its self-promotion, may be a factor here. At the same time, an information specialist or researcher using Wikipedia can obtain an overview within minutes, navigate to more information on the subject and can correct and provide additional information useful to colleagues and a general readership worldwide. This article considers how Wikipedia works and how it can meet some of the needs of African experts but also be of benefit to the general public. Let us first look at some recent initiatives that have been put forward to connect Wikipedia and African Studies.

Recent Initiatives

In last year's edition of *Africana Libraries Newsletter*, Marcia Tiede reported on a lecture by Phoebe Ayers from the Wikimedia Foundation who was discussing Wikipedia and Africa.[1] The WikiAfrica project she mentioned involved collaboration between South African and Italian institutes to improve the content of Wikipedia related to Africa (texts and photos that now total more than 30,000 items).[2] A working community within Wikipedia, the WikiProject Africa, has similar goals.[3] A module of the Research Masters in African Studies at the African Studies Centre (ASC) in the Netherlands also includes Wikipedia assignments[4] and the ASC recently initiated the Wikipedians in Special Residence project to generate added interest in Africa and Wikipedia.[5]

How Does Wikipedia Work?

Wikipedia is the collaborative online encyclopedia that anyone can edit and has become a standard reference tool and fixture of daily life in the Western world. Both reviled as the death of creative thinking and hailed as the world's largest publication and a repository of encyclopedic knowledge, all the language versions together account for 500 million Internet page hits a day, making it the fifth most visited website.[6] Wikipedia is a prime example of global collaboration by volunteers working together on one unprecedented free publication in 280 languages. To start a new language version of Wikipedia, one needs an ISO language code, the free Mediawiki software and a community of volunteer writers and photographers willing to create and maintain articles and images for 'their' Wikipedia, the so-called 'users' or 'Wikipedians' (editors). The Wikipedia rules – the so-called Five Pillars – are paramount.

Five pillars of Wikipedia	
1	Wikipedia is an encyclopedia
2	Wikipedia is written from an neutral point of view
3	Wikipedia is free content that anyone can edit, use, modify and distribute
4	Editors should treat each other with respect and civility
5	Wikipedia does not have firm rules

These rules define the content, style and juridical status of materials and the conduct expected of editors and help to formulate more detailed guidelines for editors on specific topics. Rule 5 aims to ensure an open mind is maintained, allows for a degree of common sense and minimises petty debates that can restrict the creation of content.

The Wikipedia process resembles the scientific review process in that an editor contributes and discusses with others (as in the refereeing process) to improve content using 'talk pages'. If an impasse occurs, others can be invited to voice their opinion. Chosen 'moderators' step in when tough/controversial decisions are required. Articles of poor quality that cannot be brought up to the required standard as judged by the community may be removed by the moderators. Of course, there are cases of conflict between dedicated (and less dedicated) editors but this is usually as often about behavior as content. Wherever possible, democratic rules are applied and each editor can request (and obtain) a referendum on topics of general interest within a Wikipedia language community.

Wikipedia's methods differ appreciably in other respects too from those accepted in academia as a whole. Most users use a pseudonym in Wikipedia though some do use their own names or an easily recognisable alias. So a Wikipedia contributor can see his/her reviewer returning sometimes repeatedly under his/her pseudonym. Another difference is that the text one writes for Wikipedia is published immediately and is visible for all to see, though the content is mostly removed within minutes in clear cases of bungling. At the same time, serious corrections on articles can sometimes take a few weeks depending on the activities of other users and moderators.
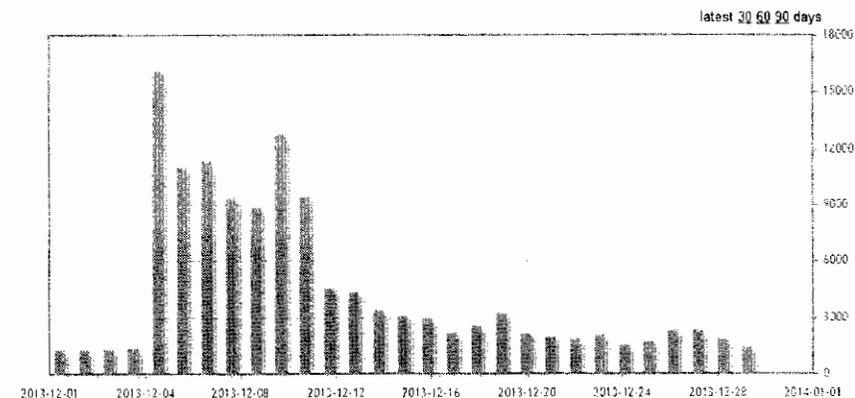
African Wikipedias and Interest for Africa on Wikipedia

Many African language versions have a 'Fledgling Wikipedia' status, for example, like the Hausa version that has 300 Wikipedia articles for 53 million speakers.[7] They need at least 1000 articles to achieve recognition and receive continued database support by the Wikimedia Foundation in San Francisco. However in spite of low Internet penetration in several countries in Africa, five extensive Wikipedias in African languages have already emerged. Many Wikipedia authors naturally choose the English and French Wikipedias as their medium to write about Africa.

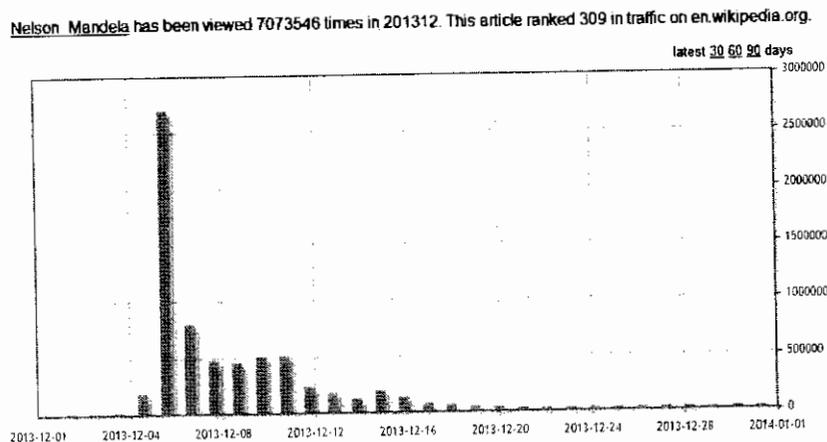| Top Five African-Language Wikipedias by number of articles (January 2014)[8]					
Language	Number of articles	Number of page views/month	Number of page views/hours	Number of editors	Number of speakers
Malagasy	47,111	896,265	864	7,037	18 M
Yoruba	30,279	904,295	1,153	10,508	28 M
Afrikaans	29,412	4,258,813	5,871	57,615	13--23 M
Swahili	25,631	2,615,908	2,506	17,585	65 M
Amharic	13,384	840,045	946	15,812	25 M

Interest in Africa is evidenced by high page-view numbers[9] at times of special newsworthy events, such as during the revolution in the Central African Republic when the Francophone Wikipedia peaked at 17,000 views a day in

République centrafricaine has been viewed 129421 times in December 2013. This article ranked 1998 in traffic on fr.wikipedia.org.

December 2013 and following the death of Nelson Mandela when there were 2.7 million views on the English-language Wikipedia but also on other Wikipedias too.

This screenshot of a Wikipedia statistics page shows the number of page views for the article République centrafricaine on the French Wikipedia in December 2013. The numbers reflect the surge of interest in the Francophone world during the political turmoil during that month.

Nelson Mandela has been viewed 7073546 times in 201312. This article ranked 309 in traffic on en.wikipedia.org.

Below is a comparison of the number of page views of four Wikipedias for African countries. They account for the Top Five in the period between November 2013 and 23/24 January 2014. The main interest in South Africa was clearly due to the death of Nelson Mandela on 5 December 2013. Old colonial ties shine through on English and French Wikipedias and Afrikaans speakers in South Africa and Namibia are naturally interested in their respective countries, their region and other hot African political topics (e.g., Egypt).

Top Five Interest for Articles on African Countries By number of page views on various Wikipedias (Wp, November 2013 - January 2014)				
	English Wp	**French Wp**	**German Wp**	**Afrikaans Wp**
1	South Africa	Afrique du Sud	Südafrika	Suid-Afrika
2	Egypt	Maroc	Marokko	Namibië
3	Morocco	Algérie	Ägypten	Libië
4	Nigeria	République centrafricaine	Mauritius	Zambia
5	Ethiopia	Madagascar	Madagascar	Egypte

Research shows that South America has not been better covered on the English Wikipedia than Africa, judging by the availability of extensive biographies of the respective heads of state at different points in history. Wikipedia offers detailed biographies of the heads of state in 1960 and today for the twelve South American states but also for all 54 African countries.

Examples of Controversial and Good Articles on African Subjects

African history and politics offer an abundance of controversial persons and sensitive topics and this controversy is reflected in debates between editors on Wikipedia. Singling out the following articles on the English Wikipedia illustrates how Wikipedia works using the 'View History' button.

- Idi Amin: many reverted additions over the years, mostly due to 'false records', 'dubious unsourced content' and 'unencyclopedic personal commentary'.

- Paul Kagame: an editor insisted on adding the Spanish indictment and finally succeeded.

- Uhuru Kenyatta: a header added in March 2013 signals various problems with this article as it appears to have been partly written by Kenyatta's supporters, which violates Rule 2, i.e. adopting a neutral point of view. The reader was invited to correct this.

The following articles on the English-language Wikipedia are judged by these authors to be well written:

- Apartheid: a balanced overview, although in some sections references are still being solicited by the collective authorship.

- Chinua Achebe: a "featured article", i.e. of special quality, elected by the Wikipedia community.

- Mozambican War of Independence: also a Wikipedia featured article.

Wikimedia Commons: 20 Million Media Files

Wikimedia Commons (or just Commons) is an online repository of free-use images, sound and other media files. Launched in September 2004, it is a project initiated by the Wikimedia Foundation and files from Wikimedia Commons can be used across all Wikimedia projects in all languages, including Wikipedia, Wikibooks, Wikivoyage, Wikispecies, Wikisource and Wikinews. They can also be downloaded for offsite use. The number of edits on Commons reached 100 million in July 2013 and by March 2014 the repository contained over 20 million media files.

The Wikimedia Commons database is a stunning example of what cooperation on a global scale can accomplish. It includes old photographs of buildings that were destroyed years ago and of paintings from museums all over the world (the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam donated 150,000 high-quality photographs of almost all its paintings) as well as photos taken by Wikipedians who donated these as illustrations of their holiday destinations or their favorite spots in their home town, and also old illustrations from library databases. Most images are provided under a Creative Commons License, for example, CC-BY-SA-3.0, which means that one is free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, adapt it (remix, transform and build on it) for any purpose, even commercially as long as appropriate credit (BY) and shares (SA: one distributes the new material under the same license) are given.

Conclusion

Wikipedias in various languages offer people a new channel for obtaining and distributing valid information on Africa (and other subjects) and of reaching millions of readers worldwide. Using Wikipedia,[10] Africanists can benefit in two ways: as readers they can quickly obtain a sourced but non-academic outline of topics of interest, and as outreach writers, they can inform the public worldwide about recent insights and attempt to solve (the many) misunderstandings on African topics with unprecedented efficiency.

Notes

[1] Marcia Tiede 'Wikipedia Growth and Africa: a report', *Africana Libraries Newsletter*, Fall 2013, pp.2-4
(http://www.indiana.edu/~libsalc/african/aln/ALN132.pdf)

[2] Africa Centre Cape Town & Lettera27 (Project started in 2011), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiAfrica and Wiki Africa Incubator 2012

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Africa

[4] Research Masters in African Studies, Leiden University, http://www.ascleiden.nl/?q=content/research-masters. See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_African_studies_journals

[5] This project is part of a larger Dutch project, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM/Wikipedians_in_Special_Residence_in_the_Netherlands_2013-2014

[6] The web analytics site https://Alexa.com

[7] Wikipedia in the Hausa language can be found at: https://ha.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hausa

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Wikipedias (N.B. The number of active editors is much lower than the number cited above.) http://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/Sitemap.htm (views/h)

[9] The authors gratefully acknowledge the Wikipedia page-view counter at http://stats.grok.se

[10] Discussion list ALC-ASA (African Librarians Council-African Studies Association) and H-net: http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-West-Africa&month=1312&week=b&msg=HAkYLKhXZ/S%2BqLi8BOhbIA