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Stepping in and Contributing to Wikipedia: Does it Still Make Sense Today? Does it have a Meaning for Historicism?

Claire Piguet, historienne du patrimoine, Office du patrimoine bâti et immatériel du canton de Neuchâtel¹

Be Present where the Audience Looks for Information

One of the missions of the Office du patrimoine bâti et immatériel (Heritage Office) of the Canton of Neuchâtel (hereinafter OCPI) is to promote the cultural heritage located within its territory, and to aim its communication at audiences as diverse as heritage professionals, government employees and the general public.²

Mastering the mediation tools commonly used in the cultural³ and administrative⁴ sectors, the OCPI needed to develop new communication channels to meet the advent of the Internet and Web 2.0. As part of a state administration, it did not have access to social networks⁵ and had had mixed experiences with touristic-cultural applications that required a great deal of editorial work to reach a fairly small and regional audience.

Driven by a mixture of curiosity and scepticism, the OCPI decided in 2016 to explore the possibilities offered by Wikimedia. Being the main gateway for the general public, as well as for the media, politicians, students, tourists and many researchers, the collaborative encyclopaedia Wikipedia had established itself as a key player in the digital sphere and as one of the largest knowledge-sharing projects of our time. The figures at that time suggested thus a high potential for a receptive audience, a fact confirmed today (fig. 1).

¹The author would like to warmly thank Amandine Cabrio, Géraldine Galfetti, Gilliane Kern, Flor Méchain, Kerralie Ouevray, Sylvie Pipoz, Christine Rodeschini and Anne-Lise Veya for our meaningful discussions, as well as their direct or indirect contributions to this article.

² *Loi cantonale sur la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel (LSPC)* du 4 septembre 2018 (*Cantonal law on the preservation of cultural heritage*, 4 September 2018).

³ European Heritage Days, guided tours, publications, exhibitions, etc.

⁴ See the Internet pages on the State website and Architectural Census files (*Recensement architectural du canton de Neuchâtel*) on the Neuchâtel Geoportal (SITN).

⁵ A prerogative of the Chancellery and the Communication Service of the Canton of Neuchâtel.

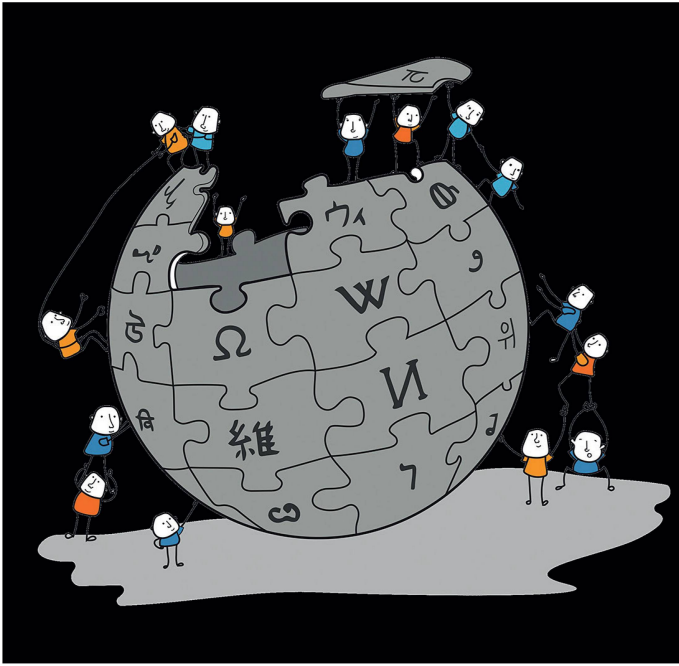


Fig. 1. Creating and sharing knowledge worldwide is Wikimedia's main goal. *Wikipedia logo with the community*, 2018. Giulia Forsythe, redrawn by Asiyeh Ghayour, via Wikimedia Commons.

Available in more than 300 different languages, the online encyclopaedia is now the 4th most visited website in Switzerland. In round figures, it compiles 60 million articles in all languages for 500 million views per day worldwide. It has nearly 7 million articles in English, 3 million in German, 2.7 million in French, 2 million in Italian and 4000 in Romansh.⁶

However, as there is a lack of specialist literature on the use of Wikimedia in the field of cultural heritage conservation,⁷ and before investing time and data, the OCPI still needed to obtain some guarantees about the seriousness and longevity of the system. Founded on the encyclopaedia model, Wikipedia fundamentally challenged the principle of authors' expertise and the way in which knowledge is disseminated. Suspected at the outset of being unreliable because of its open-ended editorial style and alleged laxity when it came to references, could Wikipedia be used as a research tool and/or an instrument for promoting cultural heritage on a wider scale, without wasting resources and information? What would be the risks and advantages of this tool in the cultural field? Would contributing to these projects be compatible with public service ethics? Often compared to a kind of Swiss army knife, was Wikipedia really a first-resort resource in which to invest knowledge and time?

⁶ As figures are constantly evolving, we rounded off those available at the beginning of October 2024.

⁷ Unlike the field of conservation of built heritage, the library, archive and museum sector were quick to put these questions on its professional agenda. In Switzerland i.e., the journal *Arbido* regularly addresses issues related to Wikimedia; the 2015 special issue as well as the other articles devoted to various wiki-projects are available online (see bibliography).



Fig. 2. *Wiskeypedia* by Mark Lynch, 2017.
Daily Cartoons–Mark Lynch, via Facebook.

Whilst this contribution does not claim to analyse this socio-documentary phenomenon in its entirety, it will look back at a decade of discoveries and experiences of a contributor whose expertise is in historical research and publications without, however, any formal training in digital humanities.

Searching for Guarantees

A promising digital longevity and a transparent open-source system

In an ever-evolving digital world, Wikipedia is now a dinosaur, with the first articles going online in English in February 2001, followed by numerous language versions, including German-, French- and Italian Wikipedias in spring 2001 and the Romansh version at the end of 2004.⁸ In order to provide a legal framework for these many initiatives, the Wikimedia Foundation was set up in the United States in 2003, and national entities were added, including Wikimedia Switzerland in 2006.⁹

The whole system is based on an open-source application called Wiki. Created in 1995, this software allows users to instantly edit information on a website and participate directly. It is behind the major projects such as Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons and Wikidata, alongside more confidential initiatives such as Wikivoyage, Wikinews or WikiValais (fig. 2). In what follows, Wikimedia will be understood as a term that covers the whole wiki galaxy, thus differentiating it from projects having their own specific names.

⁸ <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>>.

⁹ <<https://wikimediafoundation.org/about>> and <<https://wikimedia.ch/en>>.

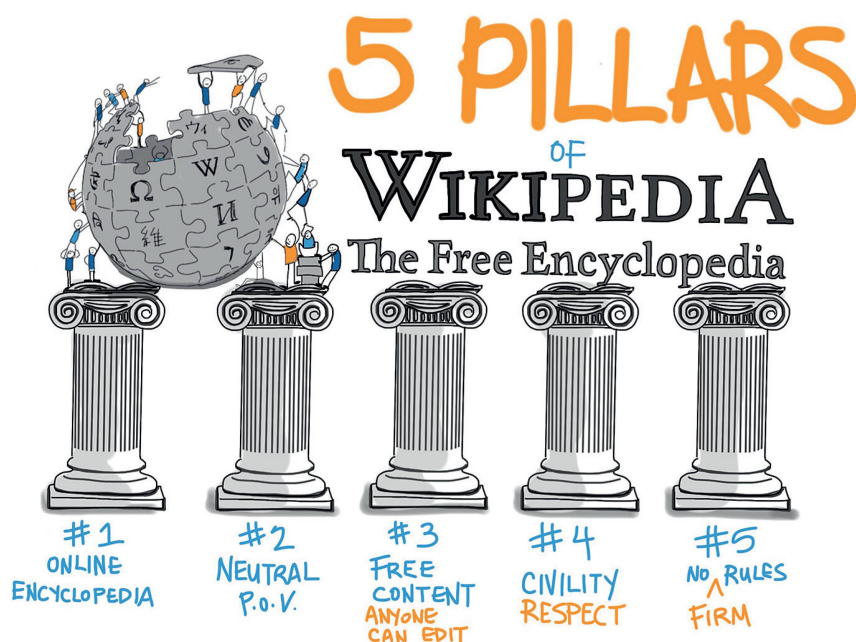


Fig. 3. *Five Pillars of Wikipedia* by Giulia.forsythe, via Flickr shared under a Creative Commons license.

A site where not just anyone can write just anything or anyhow

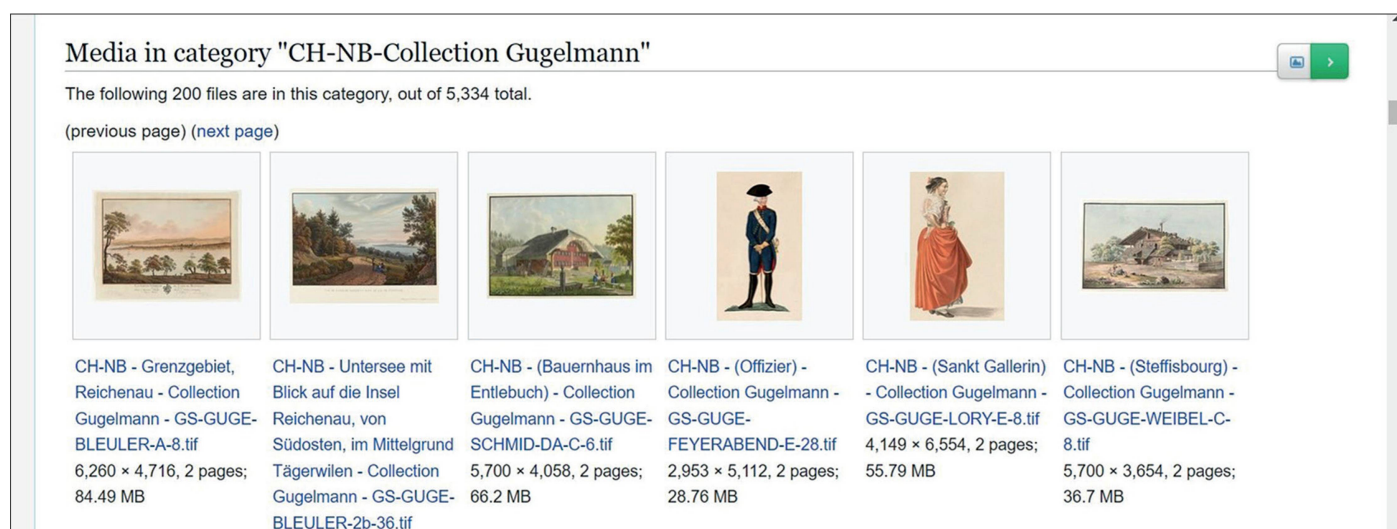
Based on the encyclopaedia model, Wikipedia offers a disruptive way of producing information in the sense that authors are not certified by their peers. The platform is collaborative, which means that it is written, corrected and added to by a community of Internet users (hereinafter the community). This community is sometimes difficult to define for a newcomer, since the authors are not necessarily specialists or professionals, but people driven by the desire to contribute to free, impartial and verified knowledge. Despite its rejection of the codes of scholarly encyclopaedias, Wikipedia operates according to five founding principles (fig. 3).¹⁰

1. Wikipédia is an encyclopedia.
2. Wikipédia is written from a neutral point of view.
3. Wikipédia is free content that anyone can use, edit, and distribute.
4. Wikipédia's editors should treat each other with respect and civility.
5. Wikipédia has no firm rules.

These non-negotiable founding principles were developed by Internet users and formally drafted in 2005.¹¹ The implementation modalities are assured by the countless on-line «help pages» which are themselves negotiated «democratically» within the community and can thus evolve.

¹⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars>.

¹¹ Mathis 2001, 30–35.



Accessible via interwiki links, the 300 or so language versions follow the same founding principles but live and evolve independently. For example, the French pages on the Jürgensen Tower in Les Brenets or on the Église rouge (Red Church) in Neuchâtel link to other language versions, but their contents are far from word-for-word translations of the texts written by the OCPI.¹²

GLAMs, valuable contributors in the cultural field

Facing a decline in contributions after a decade of growth, Wikimedia has been working to diversify the profile of its contributors since 2008–2009. Recognising that cultural institutions had enormous potential in the area of digitised and structured data as well as human resources able to improve the quality of articles, Wikimedia initiated the GLAM-wiki project (an acronym for Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums), partnerships between national bodies and interested cultural institutions.¹³ Whether formalised by a contract or not, participation in Wikimedia takes different forms, from awareness-raising workshops to the uploading of image collections via a variety of editorial formulas.¹⁴

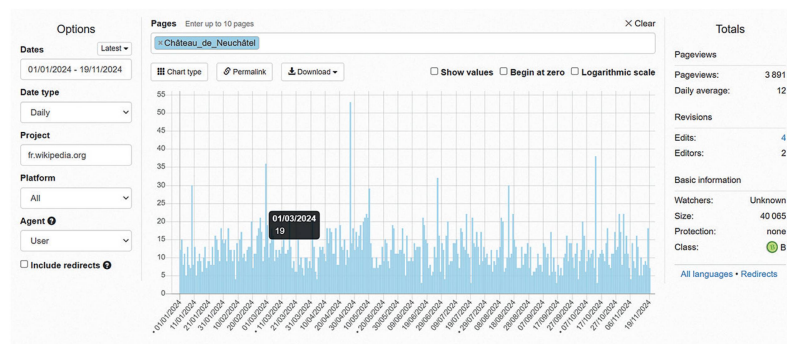
Even if gains in terms of visitor numbers are difficult to quantify precisely, renowned institutions such as the British Museum and the Rijksmuseum have contributed all or part of their digital collections to Wikimedia Commons. Such uploading made high-definition images available to professionals and the general public, as well as quality photographic credits and metadata. In Switzerland, the library and archive domain was quick to take an interest in such projects, as demonstrated by the pioneering contributions of the Swiss National Library and Archives (fig. 4), followed by partnerships

Fig. 4. Page featuring images from the Gugelmann collection, with useful thumbnails and metadata. Wikimedia Commons, accessed 15 October 2024.

¹² Tour Jürgensen in Les Brenets: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tour_J%C3%BCrgensen>; Église rouge in Neuchâtel: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Notre-Dame-de-l%27Assomption_de_Neuch%C3%A2tel>.

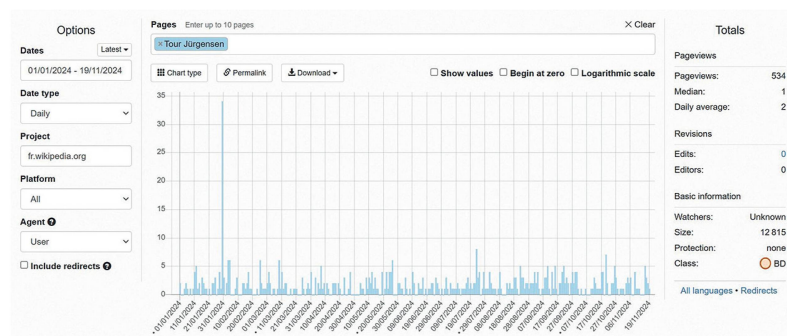
¹³ <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM>>.

¹⁴ To follow the Swiss and regional projects, see : <<https://wikimedia.ch/en/programmes/glam>> and <<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikip%C3%A9dia:GLAM/WikiRomandie>>.



Château de Neuchâtel 01/01/2024 - 19/11/2024

#	Language	Page title	Badges	Pageviews	Daily average
Totals	10 languages	9 unique titles		12 554	39
1	fr	Château de Neuchâtel		3 891	12
2	de	Schloss Neuenburg (Schweiz)		3 585	11
3	en	Neuchâtel Castle		2 751	8
4	it	Castello di Neuchâtel		900	3
5	ru	Замок Невшатель (Швейцария)		721	2
6	zh	納沙泰爾城堡		299	1
7	ja	ヌーシャテル城		198	1
8	nl	Kasteel van Neuchâtel		123	0
9	als	Schloss Neuenburg (Schweiz)		44	0
10	frp	Châtel de Nôchâtel		42	0



Tour Jürgensen 01/01/2024 - 19/11/2024

#	Language	Page title	Badges	Pageviews	Daily average
Totals	2 languages	1 unique title		974	3
1	fr	Tour Jürgensen		534	2
2	de	Tour Jürgensen		440	1

with institutions such as the *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland* as well as others having comparatively limited resources.¹⁵

The GLAM-wiki projects have gradually helped to «reset the terms of the relationship between the cultural sector and wikimedians, from [that] of defensiveness to collaboration».¹⁶ In early years, professionals readily deplored the community's lack of expertise, while the wikimedians¹⁷ feared conflicts of interest and a challenge of the encyclopaedia «amateur» spirit.¹⁸ A decade later, the experiment is deemed a win-win situation: Wikimedia is improving the quality of its contents while the GLAMs increase their visibility and page-view numbers (fig. 5).

OCPI's choice confirmed...

Constantly revised by volunteer contributors and supported by renowned institutions, Wikimedia and its sister projects were considered as sufficiently reliable for OCPI to follow in the footsteps of its colleagues at the

Fig. 5 The page-view numbers of the Château de Neuchâtel and the Jürgensen Tower over a year, as well as the number of visits in «foreign» languages. <pageviews.wmcloud.org>.

¹⁵ Swiss National Archives with 5066 photographs from the First World War: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:CH-BAR_Collection_First_World_War_Switzerland?uselang=eng>. Swiss National Library with the Gugelmann collection: <<https://open-data.swiss/en/dataset/the-gugelmann-collection-schweizer-kleinmeister>>. *Historical Dictionary of Switzerland*: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Historical_Dictionary_of_Switzerland?uselang=eng>.

¹⁶ Stinson/Fauconnier/Wyatt 2018, 18.

¹⁷ The term wikimedian or wikipediaian refers to a person who contributes to Wikimedia, respectively to Wikipedia; he or she may be an expert in a field or simply a passionate; they all share a common goal: to create a free encyclopaedic resource accessible to all.

¹⁸ Openly stating his or her professional status on the user page helps to dispel misunderstandings.

State Archives.¹⁹ Offering as many guarantees as is possible in digital matters, Wikimedia stood out as an open source tool that had proved its worth, requiring no platform or infrastructure of its own and costing relatively little in terms of financial and human resources. As a publication, its economic and technical model was also compatible with the expectations of the canton of Neuchâtel in terms of accessibility both for contributors and users.²⁰

Getting Started: Contributing to Wikimedia

Once the decision made, the OCPI – in the person of the present author – took advantage of a workshop organised by the Vaud Cantonal Archives in order to get to know the system and develop its first Wikipedian skills. Since 2017, the OCPI has also been involved in the setting up of WikiNeocomensia, an initiative aimed at filling the gaps in articles, images, data and information relating to Neuchâtel's heritage (monuments, art, personalities, history, etc.).

WikiNeocomensia:

- Archives de l'Etat de Neuchâtel (State Archives): enhancement of archive collections, online images, bibliographic additions;
- Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel (Public and University Library): entries on personalities from Neuchâtel, bibliographic additions;
- Musée des beaux-arts de La Chaux-de-Fonds (Fine Art Museum): updates and articles on regional artists.
- Office cantonal du patrimoine bâti et immatériel (State Heritage Office): updates and articles on the built heritage of the state of Neuchâtel, bibliographic additions;
- Service de l'urbanisme de La Chaux-de-Fonds (Town Planning Department): updates and articles on La Chaux-de-Fonds, bibliographic additions.

Each of the contributors is involved according to her own areas of expertise, missions and availability. Every two months or so, a session is held to share experiences and skills, thus developing a community of practice. Training workshops are also organised from time to time.²¹

Within this stimulating environment, the OCPI decided to concentrate its efforts on creating and improving articles. Rather than focusing on general and biographical subjects relating to the history of Neuchâtel, it has drawn up a list of around a hundred so-called historic monuments deemed deserving of inclusion on Wikipedia. Its contributions range from simply updating

¹⁹ In Neuchâtel, the State Archives have been contributing since 2015. Galfetti/Rodeschini 2018, 41–45.

²⁰ Non-commercial system, with no collection of personal data or monetisation of information in particular.

²¹ <<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Projet:WikiNeocomensia>>.

the bibliography to writing full articles or adding a paragraph or illustrations to an existing page. A link to the Architectural Census of the canton of Neuchâtel²² is systematically inserted, as is a minimum of one contemporary image per building. Sometimes an interesting article relating to Neuchâtel's heritage exists in another language version, so the OCPI translates it and adds to it. It also keeps an up-to-date list of articles that could be translated.

A quick guide to feeling at ease on Wikipedia

Contributing to the online encyclopaedia requires a learning phase, but above all presumes some changes for historians used to traditional publications. Among other things, creating an article on Wikipedia involves indeed a fairly sophisticated procedure that meets very strict referencing and eligibility criteria.

As mentioned above, the reliability of the information is not based on the expertise of peers but on a proofreading process based on the multiplicity of Internet users, as well as on the obligation to accompany each assertion with a source, i.e. a minimum of two published references per article. While the aim here is to allow any reader to verify the author's assertions, this way of doing things logically condemns the citation of archival documents essential to the development of historical knowledge.²³ For example, the paragraph devoted to the Gorgier bathing pavilion had to be referred to an article in the local press supplied by the OCPI rather than to the original archive documents!

As an encyclopaedia with a broad range of subjects, Wikipedia does not impose or refuse any subject as long as it complies with the law and does not serve as a propaganda platform or advertising portrait. To tackle potential manipulations, the creation of articles is governed by admissibility criteria, including the aforementioned references, as well as a certain level of notoriety. While the latter criteria may be controversial in spheres such as politics, economics and entertainment, it is not considered a problem in the cultural sphere.

By accepting the principle of «neutral point of view», an author undertakes then to offer an objective synthesis of knowledge; he or she therefore refrains from giving his or her opinion, formulating hypotheses or publishing original research. Clear, concise and easy to understand, the sobriety of the writing required in Wikipedia excludes colourful, imprecise and subjective formulations, but allows the use of vocabulary specific to the subject matter.²⁴

²² Recensement architectural du canton de Neuchâtel.

²³ For several years now, wikipedia archivists have been working to define a highly valuable citation model (<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mod%C3%A8le:Cite_archive>). For the time being, it remains a niche practice.

²⁴ Imbued with the codes of the digital world, Wikipedia still has room for improvement

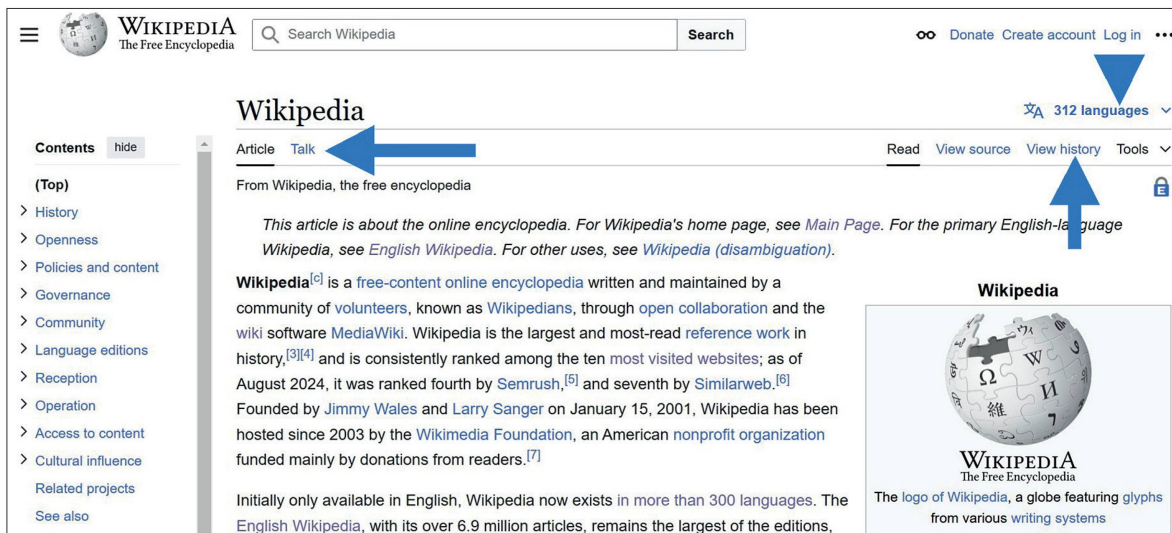


Fig. 6 Exploring the many tabs (language, history, talk etc.) that hide behind the main page allows the informed reader to use the encyclopaedia's full potential and safeguards to limit the risk of errors. Wikipedia welcome page, accessed 15 October 2024.

By publishing under a Creative Commons BY-SA licence, a contributor gives up his or her individual copyright in favour of pseudonymity. Since anonymity does not exist on Wikipedia, each contributor must answer to the law for his or her contribution, using his or her pseudonym or IP address. The «history» tab (fig. 6) makes it possible to trace all modifications from a simple comma to a trashy sentence and to go back to any previous version of the article.

By subscribing to the principle of collaborative writing, authors agree to share their knowledge and accept that any contributor can modify, copy and re-use it, including for commercial purposes. Perceived by some as a loss of control, this method of publication offers substantial flexibility when it comes to quickly completing or correcting a particular text. It goes without saying that intervening in an existing article requires solid references as well as a minimum of tact and respect for the work of his or her co-authors. In the event of disagreement, each person will have to explain or justify his or her intervention on a discussion forum (fig. 6).

Finally, the absence of a set editorial framework allows considerable freedom in the treatment of a subject. While traditional encyclopaedias seek to be exhaustive at the time they are published, Wikipedia allows draft articles to be posted online. Solidly constructed and referenced, these article outlines often constitute a call for contributions, encouraging thereby other authors to contribute their knowledge to the draft. The OCPI, for example, developed the paragraph on the gardens of the Hôtel DuPeyrou in Neuchâtel, but left for later the chapter on the grand salon woodwork.²⁵

Illustrating an article: the role of Wikimedia Commons

Visitors to Wikipedia probably do not realise that the illustrations are hosted on a separate site called Wikimedia Commons. Created in 2004, this multi-

in terms of socio-cultural equity, whether in terms of the number of articles devoted to women or inclusive writing, for example.

²⁵ <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C3%B4tel_DuPeyrou>.

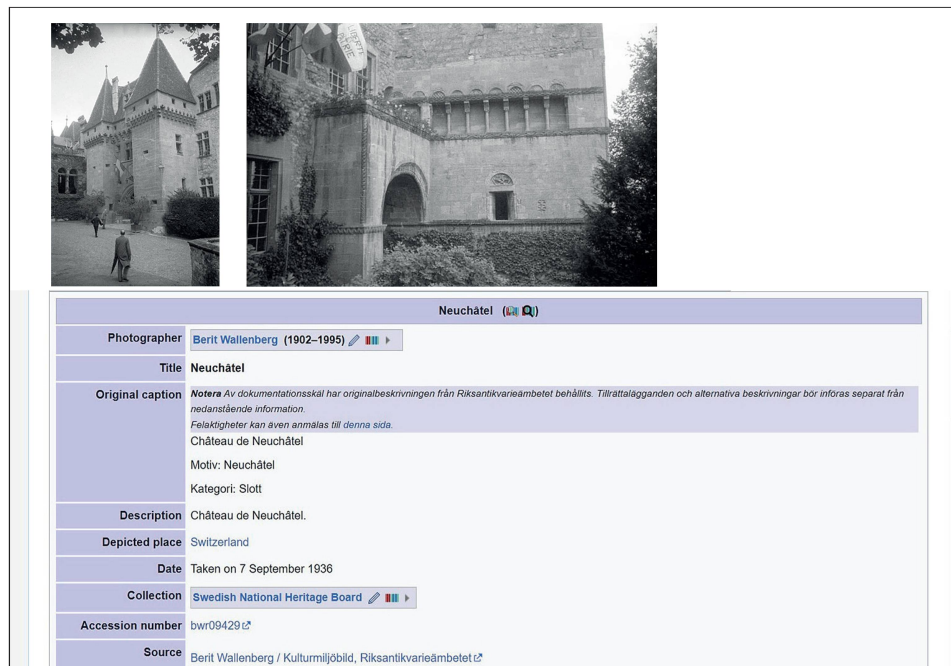


Fig. 7. Photos Berit Wallenberg, 1936, Swedish National Heritage Board via <Wikimedia Commons>.

media database centralises images and acts as a sort of common pot from which each language version of Wikipedia can draw its illustrations.

Unlike the Internet, where images circulate very freely, Wikimedia requires strict compliance with copyright law and the conditions of Creative Commons licences.²⁶ While using an image from Wikimedia Commons or uploading a personal photograph is relatively straightforward, uploading a reproduction of an old document can be a tedious nightmare. Contributors must own the rights to the file they wish to publish or be able to prove that the document is free from copyright. Meeting these requirements frequently rules out the use of the very documents that historians base their publications on. The OCPI therefore refrains from using old photographs, postcards or maps to support its statements apart from the iconographic files provided by the GLAMs (fig. 7).

Wikimedia Commons provides agreeable surprises by giving access to some unlikely images, such as the views of the Château de Neuchâtel taken in 1936 by Berit Wallenberg (1902–1995). This Swedish anthropologist, archaeologist, photographer and art historian travelled across Europe before becoming the first woman to take charge of the restoration of a historic monument in Sweden. She donated her collection of 25'000 photographs to the Swedish National Heritage Board who digitised and uploaded some of them on Wikimedia Commons.

²⁶ There are six licences for uses authorising varying degrees of modification or commercial use.

Carrying out a precise search in Wikimedia Commons can also become an ordeal because of its structure which can be described as prehistoric (multilingual cataloguing, free text descriptions and open category system in particular). Since 2018, the use of the Wikidata structured database for Wikimedia Commons has brought significant improvements and opened up the field of multi-criteria searches. Without going into technical considerations, Wikidata can help other Wikimedia projects by centralising common structured information in one place.²⁷

Wikipedia Still not for Sale

After shaking up the traditional concept of knowledge, Wikipedia has been plagued by an increase in the creation of content written by generative artificial intelligence (GAI). Despite countless safety measures, Wikipedia can make mistakes or be misled, a risk that led the OCPI to question the wisdom of its choices and the risk of misappropriation of data emanating from a public institution.

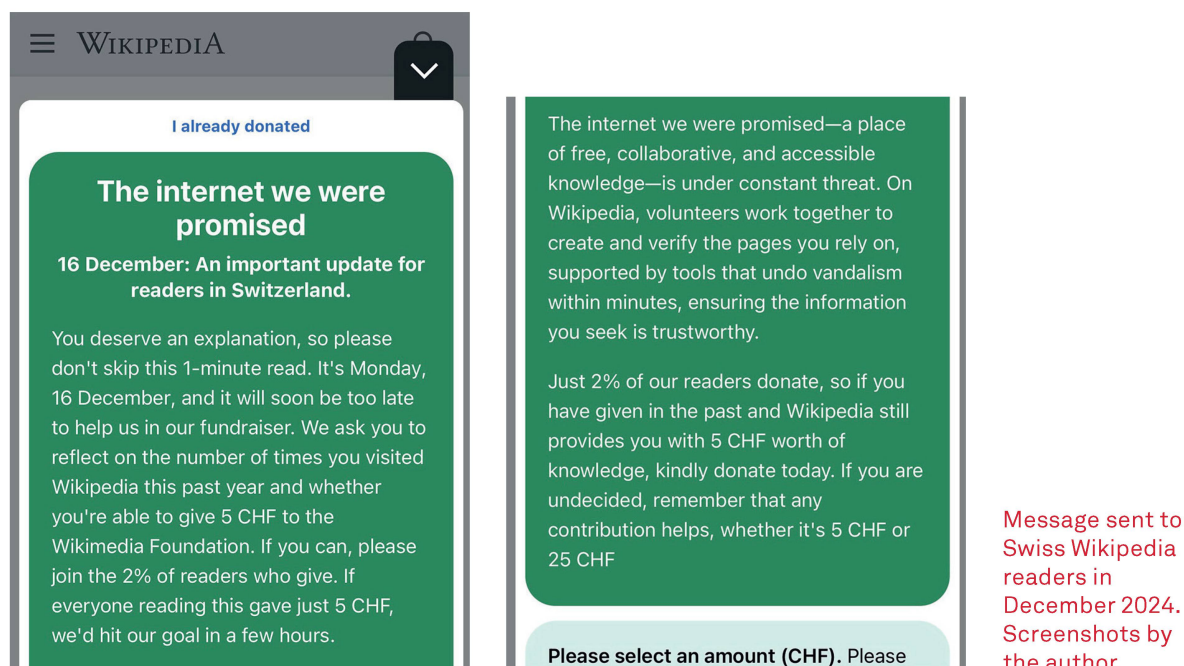
The debate surrounding the use of GAI divides the Wikipedian community and goes beyond the scope of this presentation, but it is a given that Wikimedia's links with digital technologies are porous. For example, the online encyclopaedia uses robots for repetitive tasks, data packet transfers, vandalism detection as well as certain search or translation functions. That said, content creation on Wikipedia, remains a human prerogative, a factor that was strongly criticised in its early days and which is now its strength in the face of machines.

When it comes to heritage and history, today's GAI systems and search engines run a high risk of «hallucination»²⁸ for basing their responses only on the online resources, by preference structured ones. Despite their incredible development, they still have some way to go before they can exploit on a large scale – as well as in a reliable and referenced way – the full potential and variety of sources that form the basis of a historical study (handwritten texts, images, plans, etc.).

Today, it is difficult to predict the development of GAI and its many derivative products, but for the OCPI, contributing to Wikimedia projects still makes sense because of its open-source system, the transparency of its operations, its regularly updated technical solutions, its economic model based on donations and voluntary contributions, its human component and its requirement to reference information. The online encyclopaedia has its flaws, of course, but by defending its independence, as well as its free access to objective, balanced and verified information, Wikimedia and its

²⁷ <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikidata>>. Neko 2017; Coulon 2018.

²⁸ For example, the creation of data and sources that do not exist.



sister projects offer a valuable alternative to the digital giants, a world in which the opacity of algorithms, the absence of a code of conduct and the collection and monetisation of personal data currently reign supreme.

When calling for donations in 2024, the Swiss chapter clearly reminded its users that Wikimedia is an open system, meaning that the information posted online feeds not only individual searches, but also the requests coming from the «emerging artificial intelligence technologies» (fig.8). The latter find then, free of charge, an incredible source of work and information!

Will feeding the GAI by contributing to Wikipedia still be compatible with the OCPI's missions? Until such time as national or supranational bodies tackle the legal and ethical issues surrounding the conservation and management of data, Wikimedia projects remain tools with limited risks for the OCPI, an institution which publishes its original research on paper and only uses digital platforms to promote its heritage.

How Could Historicism Benefit from Wikimedia?

As historicism is a niche research sector within the broad field of art, architecture and furniture history, members of the Swiss Network of Historicism (hereafter the Network) could take advantage of the flexibility and speed of the Wikimedia editing process to give worldwide visibility to the results of their work in Switzerland.

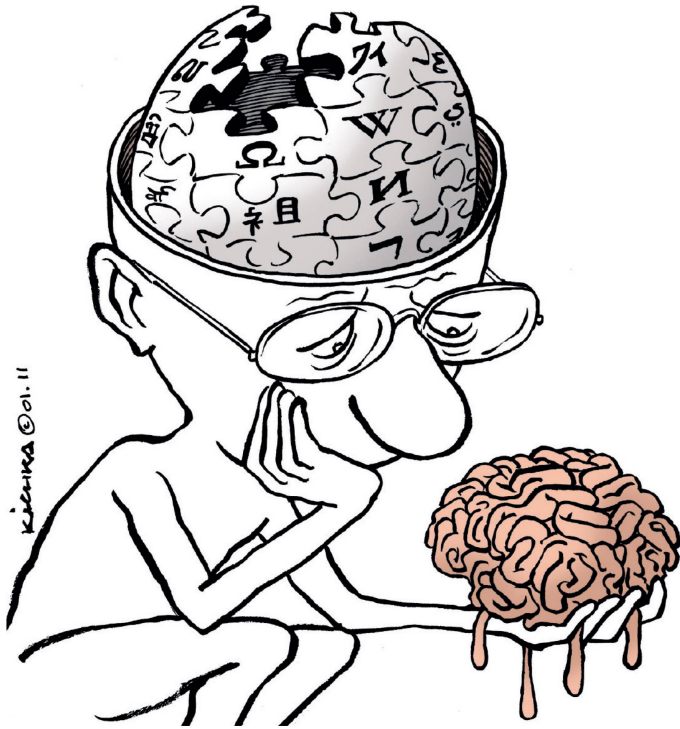


Fig.9. *Wikipedia is 10 years old*, sketch by Michel Kichka, January 2011. <https://fr.kichka.com/2011/01/16/wikipedia-a-10-ans>.

Institutions with iconographic collections could consider uploading files to Wikimedia Commons, while individual members may prefer writing well-constructed and referenced articles or inserting bibliographic supplements. The Network could also take advantage of its multilingualism to translate quality articles treating the main historicist achievements or actors of this period.

«Patrolling» the pages related to historicist topics would eventually make it possible to eliminate erroneous statements and out-of-date references as well as ensuring the quality and objectivity of the information published.

Not very popular within the academic community, the Wikimedia galaxy deserves to gain in popularity (fig.9). As an online encyclopaedia allowing to quickly disseminate factual and referenced information on a worldwide scale, Wikipedia is by no means a place for debate and reflection. In relation to historical studies, as in other fields, the platform is no substitute for the traditional publication of unpublished material with their references to archival sources and a diversity of illustrations as well as guaranteeing the intellectual property of research. Meeting thus very different objectives, the two approaches complement rather than compete with each other.

By adding little touches of knowledge or monitoring the content of open-access platforms such as Wikipedia, the Network can help to make such media more rigorous and reliable and support the fight against disinformation.

Like a Swiss Army knife, Wikipedia is a resource tool that anybody can whip out of a bag or a pocket at any time. Both can be a great help, but they are no substitute for a real toothpick, saw, corkscrew, blade or... historical study!

After a master's degree from the University of Lausanne, Claire Piguet worked as a freelance art historian before joining the Office du patrimoine bâti et immatériel (Neuchâtel). Her wide range of experiences enabled her to work in the fields of regional heritage history and town planning of the 19th and 20th centuries, conservation-restoration as well as applied arts relating to buildings, topics about which she has published many contributions.

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Further references

We do not intend to cite the countless presentation pages available on Wikipedia, no more than the numerous articles and tutorials dealing with the various Wikimedia projects. However, in the field of cultural property and historicism in particular, methodological studies are extremely rare and predate the advent of GAI.

For a general introduction to Wikimedia in French:

- Mathis 2021 (see above)

About GLAM experience around the world:

- Stinson/Fauconnier/Wyatt 2018 (see above)

For GLAM experiences in Switzerland (articles in German and French):

- *Arbido, die Fachzeitschrift für Archiv, Bibliothek und Dokumentation*, n°3, 2015 (thematic issue on GLAM et Wikimedia, available on <<https://arbido.ch/fr/edition-article/2015-1/glam-und-wikimedia>>).