

Wiki-Editing & the History of the NHS

Wikipedia as public engagement

What was done?

In November 2016, Wellcome Wikimedian in Residence Alice White worked with the People's History of the NHS project team based at the University of Warwick (and funded by the Wellcome Trust) to incorporate Wikipedia-editing into their research project as a means of public engagement. The outcome was that 11 new editors were trained and substantial improvements were made to four pages on the National Health Service.

A cohort of researchers attended one afternoon training session hosted at the University of Warwick. They then had time to scrutinise Wikipedia articles and select areas for improvement, then collect material to add to the pages during a session held just over two weeks later at the Wellcome Library in London.

Session 1

The first session provided researchers with the basic skills required to edit Wikipedia. They were provided with an overview of Wikipedia's pillars and guidelines by Alice White, who then guided them through the process of creating an account, making changes to pages, and creating a Sandbox page in which to practice. 10 people attended the session: 8 were completely new to Wikipedia and had never edited before. The new editors then had time to go away and practice drafting in their Sandbox or to compile materials and citations.

Session 2

At the second session, researchers arrived prepared to make significant changes to Wikipedia pages linked with the history of the NHS. Training was provided for another three new editors who joined us for the session and we recapped some key points for the editors who had attended the previous session. They then proceeded to edit, focussing on a few pages in particular that they could substantially improve with information and references to their reading and research. Some members chose to work in pairs and edit collaboratively, whilst others worked individually and then proofread for one another to ensure that content demonstrated readability and completeness, avoiding jargon and using the highest-quality sources available.

Motivation & Aims

The main motivation behind this activity was to add research, data and detail to wiki-pages related to the NHS. The Team had looked at existing content on this theme and considered it to be "surprisingly low" in quality and quantity of information. In addition to the researchers having a collective interest in improving the information available on their research topics, this also presented an opportunity to fulfil an obligation: most research funders require research project teams to communicate their research broadly and to reach out and engage audiences beyond scholarly university communities. Editing Wikipedia presented an opportunity to work towards this requirement and to satisfy the researchers' own interests in sharing their knowledge.

Summary

Researchers on the People's History of the NHS project learnt how to edit Wikipedia, then (after a period to evaluate Wikipedia pages and compile materials) edited and improved pages on subjects close to their research project.

Integrating Wikipedia editing into a research project allows researchers to reflect upon the sort of information that is in the public domain and how that is shaped, and also to explore the possibilities of online public engagement and reach large audiences with their research.

Context

- Research
- Public engagement

A secondary motivation was to actively engage wider audiences with the Team's work. They hoped to possibly invite members of the public to drop in and chat about the NHS or direct the team towards particular pages improve. After training, they also realised that a wider audience could engage with their work in a different way, by writing on article or user Talk pages or by editing the pages that were created or improved by the researchers and thus working with the Team's contributions.

Successes & Lessons Learnt

In two afternoon sessions a group of 14 researchers (three of whom were able to attend both sessions) were able to engage with training and then compile materials to then make substantial improvements to key Wikipedia articles relating to their research project. 43,787 bytes were added to Wikipedia in the course of the Editathon. This demonstrated that Wikipedia-editing can function successfully as an outreach and engagement activity for a research project. Participants could be completely new to Wikipedia-editing and still make a meaningful contribution, and the time required for the activity was two afternoons, which is manageable in a busy research schedule (though this could potentially be scaled up to a more regular activity – see below).

Using WMFlabs Pageviews to evaluate these pages, from the second session up to the current day the four pages that the editors particularly focussed on have been viewed 28,099 times. That represents a daily average of 223 pageviews. The researchers thus successfully shared their work with a substantial number of people by revising Wikipedia pages. Moreover, this research exposure is sustainable, as Wikipedia is an independent and widely-used website; it has a potentially wider reach than a dedicated project website, and will likely continue to exist after a project website may be wound-up.

The aim of having the public drop-in to the second session was not really fulfilled. Two members of the public came to the session to ask about the project, along with one active Wiki-editor who came to provide support. This could be improved if a similar programme were to be run in future by making the session more visible. More active Wiki-editors could be attracted through advance advertising on relevant Wikiproject pages. If run in the Wellcome Library or other such public space, more posters and tannoy announcements could help to draw people along and assure them that they are welcome to drop in. We felt that the sight of the researchers busily typing away on laptops may have given the impression that they were busy and therefore not to be disturbed. Having one person free from typing, and perhaps some visual displays, would encourage people into the room to participate.

Virtual engagement was much more successful. Four pages that were particularly the focus of improvements at the sessions have been edited 57 times by 28 unique editors. This represents a strong level of active engagement with the research and content added in addition to those who interact on a more simple level by reading.

From Wikimedia's point of view, this project was a success as it resulted in discipline-specific communication with complex scholarly information being translated and shared in accessible language. Moreover, 60% of the participants were women, a balance which helps to improve the Wikipedia gender gap.

Scalability & Transferability

The success of this project indicates how Wiki-editing offers the potential to be a successful activity for research teams looking to communicate and engage with wider audiences. It could easily be scaled up to take place once per year or even a couple of times per year, becoming a more regular feature over the course of a project.

A Wikimedia-trainer is required to provide Wikipedia publishing training, and it is beneficial if a project has a Public Engagement Research Fellow to coordinate the activity. Venues require internet access and computers or laptops for the editors to use, and a projector if possible for training purposes. Ideally the venue for the second session should be in a place where an existing audience can be capitalised upon, such as a library or museum.

This type of project can be adapted for any type of research project with a team interested in public engagement.

Appendix

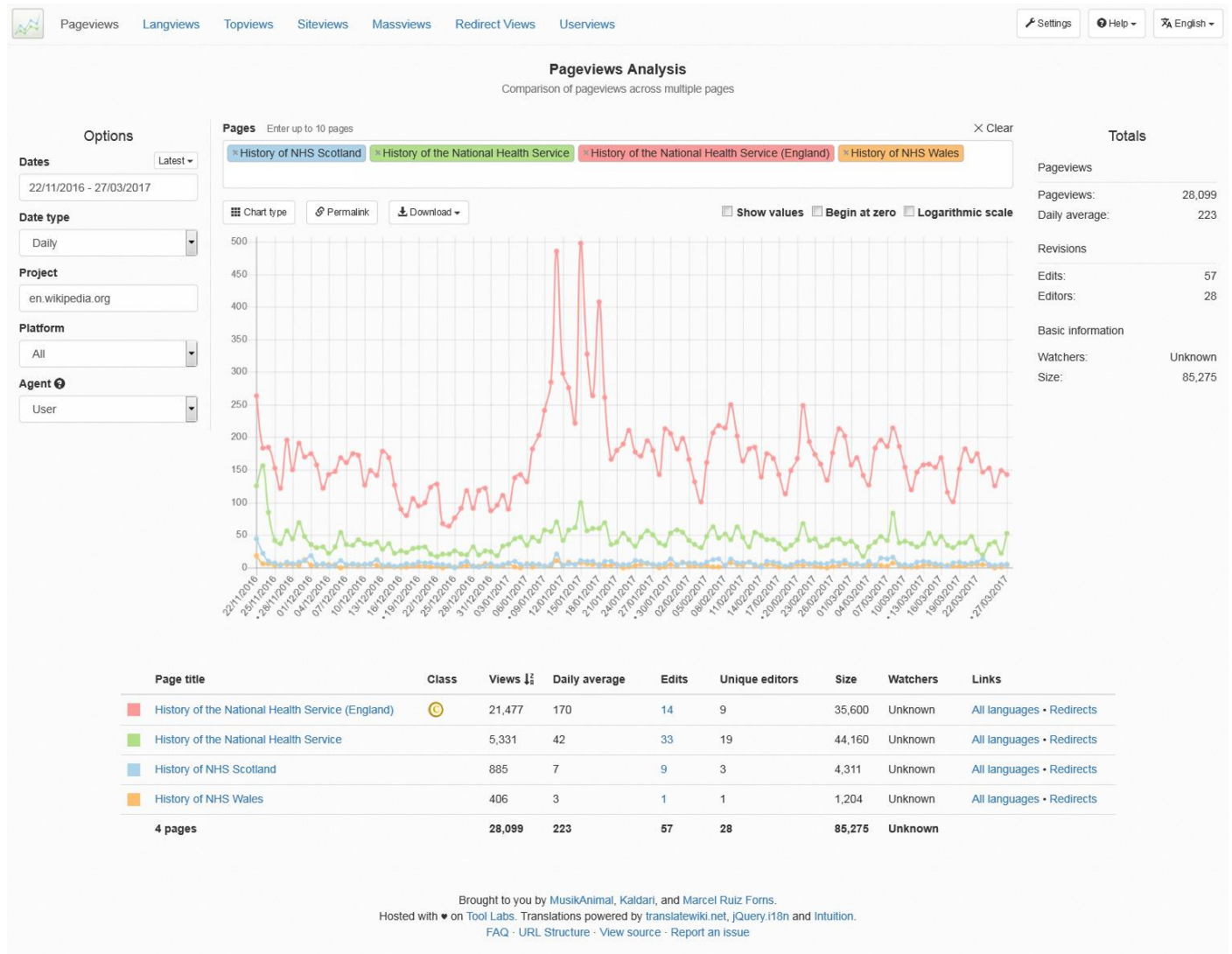
Links

- [Wellcome Library Wikimedian in Residence project page](#)
- [People's History of the NHS website](#)
- [Cultural History of the NHS university page](#)
- [Session 2 Editathon event page](#)

Improved pages

- [History of the National Health Service](#)
- [History of the National Health Service \(England\)](#)
- [History of NHS Scotland](#)
- [History of NHS Wales](#)

Statistics



Participant Feedback

I think that having a permanent Wikimedian would be incredibly valuable for all of Wellcome's researchers. We had a website, and yet we had not at all thought to edit Wikipedia until I spoke with you. It's clearly a great potential route to widening your audience - 233 page views a day, far in excess of any journal article! - and to have meaningful engagement with others passionate about this subject - as shown by the 57 edits to our page by 28 editors. Having you come in to talk us through the etiquette, logistics, and uses of Wikipedia really built the confidence of members of our team, and made us able to edit thoughtfully, in a manner which was we hope useful for both knowledge in the public sphere as well as for broadening awareness of our own work and interests.

I completely agree with your points... about potential ways to increase public attendance on the day as well. I'd be keen to work together again.