

Shiver-inducing contacts with the past



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Bodleian Wikimedian **Martin Poulter** says that the digital world can play a crucial role in sharing those shiver-inducing moments of contact with the past, such as seeing Charles Darwin's actual handwriting, and libraries can involve more people in that authentic experience.

IN my months working at the Bodleian, I've many times seen, or experienced, what I call 'the shiver'. I had it when I realised I was reading Charles Darwin's actual handwriting, or that I was shown a book that had been studied by Henry VIII. I saw it happening at the Marks of Genius exhibition¹ when people encounter an actual Gutenberg Bible or a First Folio of Shakespeare.

The shiver is a realisation of a tangible connection to the past. It comes from authenticity, physicality and uniqueness. As such, it may seem irrelevant to digital information, which is endlessly reproducible, independent of physical location and channels all knowledge and culture through the same screen.

When we think of how libraries can involve more people in that authentic experience, that digital world turns out to be crucial.

Sharing knowledge

Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the most important philosophers of rights and justice, holding views about the equality of women that were radical in her 18th-century milieu. She came from a fascinating family whose manuscripts and correspondence are held by the Bodleian.² To read Wollstonecraft's final note to her husband,³ written days before she died, is one of those shiver-inducing contacts with the past. How can more people share that experience?

Not everybody has heard of Mary Wollstonecraft, not all of those people know what she stood for or why she was so influential, and not all of *them* have read any of her books or could quote her. A way to change this, and ultimately expand the audience connecting emotionally to our favourite historic authors, is to lay out a welcoming and engaging path from the internet devices on their desk or in their hands.

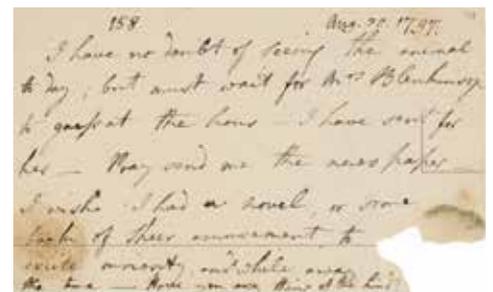
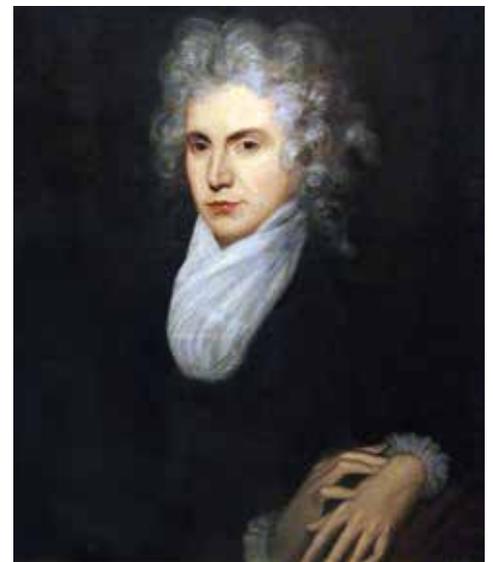
It's useful, but not enough, to put the information online. It needs to be where people will see it.

Wikipedia and Wikimedia

The Wikimedia projects are 11 volunteer-maintained websites supporting education and reference, of which

Wikipedia is the best known. They are open to anyone with an internet connection, with no adverts and no need to log in. Wikisource hosts out-of-copyright texts. Wikidata holds facts and figures while Wikiquote organises quotations by author and topic. Wikimedia Commons holds media files such as scans and photographs.

The different sites support each other. Wikidata 'knows' that the subject of a Wikipedia article, the person depicted in a specific painting scanned on Commons, and VIAF number 61632881 are all the same person, whose English names include Augusta Ada King, Ada Byron and Ada Lovelace.



Reading Mary Wollstonecraft's (pictured) final note to her husband William Godwin, written days before she died, is one of those shiver-inducing contacts with the past. How can more people share that experience?

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Sharing knowledge

These sites can connect the world of personal curiosity and informal discussion to the world of professionally published or curated resources. By creating or improving Wikipedia articles and sharing images, we can give readers a clear image – perhaps literally – of historical figures and their achievements.

Data such as birth and death dates can be put into Wikipedia and Wikidata for harvesting by other sites and apps, such as the interactive timeline generator Histropedia (<http://histropedia.com/>). These facts can have citations linking back to the scholarly literature.

These improvements don't demand a great deal of effort on the part of libraries, because they can be crowdsourced.⁴ Releasing images and catalogue metadata under a free licence allows wiki contributors to make use of them. Improving an area of Wikipedia can be made into a fun 'edit-a-thon' event, as we are doing many times over the coming year in Oxford, on topics including women in science.

Sharing texts

We can have a closer connection with historic authors by reading them, in their own words, than by reading *about* them in an encyclopedia. Ideally, all public domain, published text would be freely available to everyone in the world, with no access barriers. That is what Wikisource, the free library, works towards. My interest in Wollstonecraft and other 18th-century proto-feminists has led me to put relevant texts in Wikisource, improving a previously meagre Feminism portal.⁵

This work can use existing free-text sources. My Wikisource hobby has drawn from the University of Oxford Text Archive, Project Gutenberg, Library of Congress collections and the Internet Archive, as well as Jisc Histor-

ical Texts, which unlike the others is restricted to education institutions in the UK.

This is not just copying text from one place to another: on Wikisource we use page scans to correct transcription errors, creating definitive electronic versions. Reciprocal links with Wikipedia mean that a text on Wikisource gets far more visits than on similar sites. Most importantly, Wikisource can be a connected whole.

Building a web

John Duncombe's 1751 poem, *The Femininead, or Female Genius* pays tribute to various creative and accomplished women, including poets and philosophers. In creating a Wikisource edition, I wanted to learn more about those authors and read their works. It can be made very easy to reach this further information: as easy as one click.

Wikisource pages can have links – one of their advantages over similar archives such as Project Gutenberg. Personal names can link to Wikipedia pages or, for authors, to Wikisource profiles. So I created profiles for several authors mentioned by Duncombe. As well as listing significant works, these profiles link to Wikipedia pages and contain authority file identifiers such as VIAF and ISNI.

By embedding in a web, we turn a self-contained source text into something more like an educational object; something that draws the reader into a journey and which they can benefit from without understanding all the references in advance.

Putting subject experts centre-stage

As more people read these old texts, more of them appreciate and seek out subject specialists. In reading 18th-century feminist texts, I found names and references that needed explaining. So I needed to consult modern

scholarship, including books and papers that I would not have read if I weren't improving Wikisource.

The 'shovelware' business model, reprinting out-of-copyright books unchanged, is not viable in this world of ubiquitous, free, digital culture. So publishers have to find ways to add value. One way is for a modern scholar to supply valuable context, via introductory essays or annotated editions.

Access to subject specialists can be even more direct: someone who has read the poetry of Hannah More is a potential audience member for a public lecture about the Bluestockings. However informative a Wikipedia article is, the medium requires it to be dry, descriptive, and impersonal. It does not substitute for an expert bringing the topic alive with enthusiasm and wit.

More ambitiously, we might make our favourite authors or poets the subject of a continuing education course: the barrier for participating in such a course is lower if anyone can get all the source texts for free rather than tracking down print copies.

The more this text is freely available, the more it can influence the public sphere. The US feminist columnist and poet, Alice Duer Miller, recently had a satirical column that went viral on social media. This is more impressive when you realise that Miller died in 1942. Quotations or images from centuries ago can still touch or inspire, and as readers share this reaction online, the interested audience grows.

The Wikimedia projects make it easy for people to enjoy and share out-of-copyright text, creating and satisfying a modern curiosity about past authors. What we can't share digitally is that shiver-inducing connection to the past that comes from an encounter with the real physical object, but that's okay: libraries are already great at doing that. [7]

References

- 1 **Marks of Genius: masterpieces from the collections of the Bodleian Libraries** genius.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/
- 2 **Shelley's Ghost: reshaping the image of a literary family** shelleysghost.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/
- 3 **Mary Wollstonecraft's final note to her husband:** genius.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/exhibits/browse/note-to-william-godwin-1756-1836/
- 4 **Crowdsourcing: the wiki way of working** jisc.ac.uk/guides/crowdsourcing
- 5 **Feminism portal** en.wikisource.org/wiki/Portal:Feminism