

The Knowledge of Crowds

► *An experiment began in early 2008* when the Library of Congress posted 3,000 photos from its collections on the photo-sharing site Flickr and asked users to contribute information about the photos. More than two years later, and the experiment is now regular practice. For example, the LOC staff recently put a small collection of historic travel photos online and asked users to help identify them. Within a few days, Flickr members had identified every single photo and left a lively comment stream in the process.¹

► *While visiting a new city* you suddenly have two hours of free time and quickly want to find out what historic sites or history museums are worth seeing. You send a tweet to your Twitter followers to find out if they have suggestions and end up receiving several instant responses.

These two illustrations above present two examples of “crowdsourcing,” loosely defined as mining the collective knowledge of a group. Jeff Howe coined the term in a *Wired* magazine article in 2006, and offered this definition: “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.”²

Enlisting the contributions of the general public is gaining adherents. However, user-generated content is viewed with healthy skepticism by those responsible for maintaining the trust of an institution’s various audiences. Yet, faced with diminishing resources and recognizing the collective potential of historians in the general public, history organizations have begun to solicit the involvement of their users online. Since there are never enough resources to accomplish the research projects that most history organizations hope to complete, crowdsourcing offers one strategy to address the challenge.

Some organizations have developed wikis, websites built collaboratively by their users. Whether you know the term or not, you are no doubt familiar with the concept. Wikipedia, the online collaborative encyclopedia, is the best example. Anyone can log on and make additions and changes to an entry. The site’s standards demand that information be supported by hotlinks to published articles. While some still question the

authority of the site’s sources, it has become an easy way to find quick overview information about a topic. People I never expected would reference it now recommend it. It operates on the premise that the collective knowledge of the crowd will result in accurate information.

Two examples from the history world merit attention. A wiki started by Historic

Saranac Lake (HSL), a local history organization started in 1980, focuses on architectural preservation. HSL operates a museum and a website in a small community about ten miles west of Lake Placid in New York’s Adirondack Mountains. In late 2008, the organization began this online archive of local history and encouraged the public to make additions. According to executive director Amy Catania, the HSL wiki exceeded all expectations, growing rapidly to over 2,500 pages of local history. A dedicated volunteer maintains the wiki, monitoring the site daily along with two staff members.

When HSL launched a Facebook page for the site this January, traffic to the site began to increase. Each day, the staff posts a new historical photo or tidbit of history on the Facebook page with a link to the wiki. Catania says that a key to the success of the Facebook experiment is intentionally not using the Facebook

page to promote HSL or its events, but as a place to share history content. In 2009 HSL opened its museum and 400 visitors came through the doors that summer. Through the wiki and website, HSL is reaching that many people every day.³

Catania is convinced that the wiki and Facebook pages are well worth the effort. “Thanks to this project, we are capturing new stories, information, and photos from people as far away as the U.K. And we are reaching a whole new clientele that we have never reached before—many people who have moved out of the area and many young people. We are thrilled to discover that Saranac Lake history and the work of our organization is, well, for lack of a better word, popular!”

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Placeography is a wiki project of the Minnesota Historical Society. Started in 2008, it was inspired by a program at the society's library that taught people how to research house and property history. Since there was no vehicle to share the resulting research, staff with a passion for community organization and personal stories created the wiki. An early research project that made contributions to the wiki was *Right on Lake Street*, based on an exhibition about an important commercial street in Minneapolis. A group of students from Macalester College interviewed business owners and wrote entries about various buildings and sites on the street. The staff's goal was to generate 150 entries during the wiki's first year, but with a little promotion the site received more than 1,000 contributions. Though about 90 percent of entries detail Minnesota history, the wiki also includes entries about sites in six other states, and the staff invites contributions about places anywhere in the world.⁴

Nina Simon, author of the Museums 2.0 blog, offers some advice about wikis. "They require more of their audience in

terms of participation than other Web 2.0 sites and don't offer traditional rewards. The participatory 'ask' is high—to create original content. Wikis don't explicitly acknowledge individuals with 'profile power'—content is prioritized, not identity." She cautions that wikis work best when the goal is to build content, not to socialize. "They work when the individuals involved are motivated to assemble and co-create content.... The wiki has to be the best tool for the job. Otherwise, people won't contribute." In other words, if you are going to ask people to do work for you, such as research, you will need to make sure the product is useful.⁵

Another great example of crowdsourcing, again from the Minnesota Historical Society, is the *MN150* exhibition, developed to celebrate the state's sesquicentennial.

Museum staff asked the people of Minnesota to nominate people, places, things, or events originating in Minnesota that transformed the state, the United States, or the world. A committee of staff, community members, and subject matter experts then sorted through more than 2,700 nominations to select the top 150.

The exhibition's online presence is a wiki, which allows users to see all nominations, to create their own top 150 list, and to add ideas. Though the staff could easily have developed the list without public input, their willingness to be inclusive no doubt made the exhibition a richer and more engaging experience.⁶

If you want to explore the world of wikis, check out *Placeography*. But don't just read it, write an entry about a place in your neighborhood, and watch the wiki grow. ●

"History Bytes" is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at grovet@si.edu.

¹To view the Library of Congress Flickr account, see, www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/sets/72157623063035332/.

²Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired* 14.06: June 2006, www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html.

³Visit the Historic Saranac Lake wiki at <http://hsl.wikispot.org>.

⁴The *Placeography* wiki is located at www.placeography.org/index.php/Main_Page.

⁵Nina Simon, "Wikis: What, When, Why," 11 September 2008, <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2008/09/wikis-what-when-why.html>.

⁶Minnesota Historical Society, *MN150*, http://discovery.mnhs.org/MN150/index.php?title=Main_Page.

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