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Sue Gardner Calls for Librarians to Dive in to the World of Wikipedia

Submitted by [Leonard Kniffel \(/users/leonard-kniffel\)](#) on Sun, 06/26/2011 - 20:29

The folks at Wikipedia “are lovers of the institutions of knowledge” and definitely libraries, said Sue Gardner at ALA President Roberta Stevens’s special program Sunday at ALA in New Orleans. The executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation, which operates Wikipedia, said that the wiki is not opposed to traditional media; and, in fact, “we want you as Wikipedians.”

Some 400 million people use Wikipedia every month, and Gardner said the nonprofit survives through donations but remains radical in its belief that people have the right to access to information. “Wikipedia is where people are going to get their information,” she said, so “it behooves us all to help it be as good as it can be.”

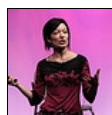
Wikipedia publishes in 273 languages, Gardner said, and each site is a unique cultural product in each language, making Wikipedia the fifth-most-used website in the world. “We do that without spending any money on advertising. People understand that Wikipedia is for them.” Because it is not commercial and not government-sponsored, and it’s free, major funding comes from its annual fundraising campaign.

Gardner showed slides of the rather lavish offices of Google and compared them with Wikipedia’s semi-shabby facilities. She quipped that they work in surroundings befitting a nonprofit, and “we are really careful, really cautious” about spending, especially given that the 10-year-old internet giant’s 100,000 editors all over the world work for free. If they didn’t, she said, it would cost \$75 million a year to produce what they produce. “They create 99.9% of the value of Wikipedia.” She shared video of happy Wikipedians at a meeting last year in Gdansk, Poland, talking about why they do it.

Gardner posited that Wikipedia has turned people into “more aware, more critical consumers of information.” Saying she was well aware that “we’re not perfect,” she emphasized that “the people in this room are the people who can make it better, and we want you to do that with us.”

Asked by an audience member if Wikipedia had problems with people contributing self-serving material, Gardner said, “They are vigilant in their defense of editorial integrity,” so they are the look-out for self-promotion, bias, and puffery. There are lots of safeguards, she noted.

Asked about the error rate in Wikipedia, Gardner said it was equivalent to similar sources, and that it takes as little as three minutes to correct errors. “We do what’s called ‘page patrolling,’



Sue Gardner speaking at the President's Program on Sunday



Roberta Stevens and Sue Gardner at the ALA President Program on Sunday



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real-time monitoring.”

Many countries are going to jump over the desktop/laptop phase and go straight to mobile, Gardner predicted. That’s really challenging for Wikipedia, which is computer based. You can edit on a phone, but fundamentally we are rooted to working at a desk, she said, cautious about the idea of “living in an app world rather than internet.” Critical of the fact that “Amazon and PayPal shut WikiLeaks down,” Gardner said to applause that this is precisely what Wikipedia does not want to see happen to the internet.

Asked about the future of journalism, Gardner, herself an accomplished journalist, said, “If you have a thing that people want you can find a way to get it paid for. It’s going to shake out and it’s going to be more rational.”

Of the hazards of copyrighted material being submitted to Wikipedia as original work, Gardner said, “It’s all about patrolling,” and “Wikipedians themselves are vigilant.”

And what’s coming down the pike for Wikipedia? “It was built 10 years ago and hasn’t changed that much,” Gardner said, but “we are looking for ways to increase serendipity.” She added that Wikipedia is not locked down and will never be completed. “We are happily dependent on the inventiveness of the people who join us of their own volition.”