Forward to Libraries

Experiences connecting digital libraries, local libraries, and Wikipedia

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{This is an approximation of what I said during the DLF Snapshot talk. Some of it was written in advance; some is my recollection of what I said on the fly and what the audience did.}

Hello, I’m John Mark Ockerbloom and I work for the University of Pennsylvania libraries. We have extensive collections and online offerings on all kinds of topics that our patrons are interested in. Just like your library. I’m sure the University of Texas library here, for instance, has lots of materials on Texas general and governor Sam Houston. So folks here who want to learn about him will start at the UT libraries website, right?
Well, maybe, but if you’ve read user studies you know most of them start at Google. And when they search Google for the general, there’s a prominent link to Wikipedia. In fact, a large proportion of topical searches in Google have Wikipedia links in the first 5 hits. So people often end up going there, whether they initially intended to or not.
But that’s okay, because now when they look at Sam Houston’s article in Wikipedia, they’ll find an invitation to come to the library to find all the Sam Houston books, biographies, letters, and such that the library has and that Wikipedia and the open Internet don’t.

And since you probably can’t see it on the screen where you’re sitting, let me blow up that invitation:
In the Wikipedia article for Sam Houston, there’s a box labeled “Library resources”. This links to books and other things about him -- or by him -- in whatever library the reader has indicated that they use. So, if the service knows that someone uses the University of Texas Libraries, then one click can take them from the Wikipedia page...
They can go to their local library

...to UT’s Scout discovery system, which automatically shows them what’s available here about, or by, good old Sam.

Or, in two clicks...
...readers can go to any of over 400 other local libraries, or gateways like Worldcat, or digital libraries like The Online Books Page— and see what they have on Sam. If you’re at a DLF member institution, your library’s one of those choices. And if your library isn’t, or the link doesn’t go to the right place in your library,
You can sign up your library

FTL: Forward to Libraries
REQUEST LINKS FOR YOUR LIBRARY

Would you like to enable links to your library’s resources from sites like The Online Books Page and Wikipedia? If you tell us a little about your library, and we can work out how to link to its catalog or discovery application, you’ll be able to follow links from selected Wikipedia articles, and Online Books Page subjects, authors, and titles, to find similar titles that your library offers. (Read more about how this works with Wikipedia and with the Online Books Page.)

If you leave your contact information, we can let you know when your library links are enabled, and how you can be directed straight to that library when following links from The Online Books Page. (You can see the list of currently supported libraries, and select your own library, here.) For best results, your library should use cataloging terms similar to those used by the US Library of Congress, and it should use a modern, link-friendly catalog or discovery application.

Tell us about the library you’re interested in
Library name:
Address of library website:

Anything we should know about making useful links to this library? (optional)

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there’s a request form you can fill out to get your library set up properly.

This linking service is called Forward to Libraries. You can find its forwarding links in well over one thousand Wikipedia articles, and the number will grow as more editors add these boxes, or similar templates, to Wikipedia articles. All you need to add them is a little Wiki markup.
So before I go on – how many of you have edited Wikipedia articles?

[Lots of hands went up]

And how many would consider yourself part of the Wikipedian community?

[As far as I could tell, all the hands went down. I hadn’t expected the contrast to be as stark as that.]

Well, it’s not the easiest group to work with. But the rewards can make it worth the effort– both in improving the quality of a site that lots of people go to, and in increasing the visibility and accessibility of your library’s resources.

A long-time Wikipedian told me that pretty much any new feature added to Wikipedia gets challenged by somebody in the community.
And that’s what happened with these Forward to Libraries boxes. Once I made the linking templates, and announced them online, some editors got really enthusiastic and started rapidly adding them to hundreds of Wikipedia pages. Well, great. But then we started getting reversions, and complaints, and an administrator saying the boxes had to go, and then there was what’s known as a TfD period called. TfD stands for Templates for Discussion, but it also potentially stands for Templates for Deletion. Which was not only a bit nerve-wracking for the template author, but the templates themselves got all uglified as TfD warnings appeared on them.

But if you persist, and listen to people, and enough of them are convinced that a new feature is useful, you can make it through this process. That’s what happened with my templates. I listened to the concerns that Wikipedians had, and made some changes to accommodate them, like having the forwarding take place on Wikipedia’s own servers rather than on mine, and disabling forwarding based on IP addresses, due to privacy concerns.
And eventually consensus was reached. Wikipedians accepted the links, and even wrote their own guide to using them.

One reason I’m telling you this is that these links go on a Wikipedia article only when an editor puts them there. So if you want to put them on an article for a topic where there are useful library resources, you need to do it in a way that enhances the article without cluttering it.
If that box of links I showed you is too obtrusive, for instance, you might want to use one of the inlined-text templates I provide instead.

And if you have *unique* digital offerings that really enhance the article, you can probably just make a direct link to them. But if you’re one of many libraries that offer resources on a topic, the links I provide that forward to any library might well be useful.
Open data makes this all possible

- Virtual International Authority File from OCLC
  - [http://viaf.org/](http://viaf.org/)
- Subject and name authorities from LC
  - [http://id.loc.gov/](http://id.loc.gov/)
- Article content from Wikipedia
- Catalog data from The Online Books Page
  - [http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/aboutolbp.html#data](http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/aboutolbp.html#data)

Now, I have to give credit to all the open data out there that helps make this service work. With VIAF from OCLC, the various name and subject authority files from the Library of Congress, and the complete content dump that Wikipedia makes available, it’s feasible to map between hundreds of thousands of Wikipedia article titles and the headings used in library authorities.
Likewise, I’m making my own data and code available with open licenses on Github. You can see how I construct links to dozens of different kinds of catalogs and discovery systems— and if you have a custom system, we can often handle that as well— and how various topical subject headings are associated with Wikipedia article titles.
And you can implement the forwarding service on your own digital library websites, either by implementing your own forwarding service or linking to the one I maintain at Penn. For instance, I also have library forwarding links from my Online Books Page, so that folks who want to read more than the freely available books I list can find out what else they can read at their local library.
Consider context and guidance...

It also might be worth thinking about what you want to show readers coming to your site for a specific topic. One of the appealing things about Wikipedia, and increasingly about Google as well, is that it doesn’t just give you a list of links on something you’re interested in. It also provides you basic facts and context, and helps you figure out directions where you might want to continue your search.

When we look at, say, St. Catherine of Siena in Google, we see information about her, some images, related topics, and yes, a list of web links.
Similarly, people on a library website might appreciate seeing the books you have on her, and the articles, and related topics, and databases or websites where they can find out more, and find librarians that can help them further, and so on.
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- Register your library (DLF libraries already in)
- Add link templates to Wikipedia articles
- Add the service to your digital library interfaces
  - (E.g., it’s also on The Online Books Page)
- Download, and build on, code and data
  - You can also consider, improve, your results displays
- Find out more:
  - Google “Forward to Libraries” for documentation
  - My blog: http://everybodyslibraries.com/
  - Me: ockerblo@pobox.upenn.edu  @JMarkOckerbloom

But that’s up to you.

Forward to Libraries gets information seekers from Wikipedia, The Online Books Page, and other online information sites to your library, once that library’s registered. You can add the service to relevant Wikipedia articles. You can enable the service in your digital library collections. And you can consider what you want users to see when they follow links to your own library’s website.

You can find out more by Googling Forward to Libraries, checking my blog, or getting in touch with me. I’m John Mark Ockerbloom. Thank you for listening.