

Ben Vershbow



Job title: Lead Programs Manager (libraries, education, cultural heritage)

Organisation: Wikimedia Foundation

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Abstract:

Title: Let's Finally Connect All the World's Cultural Heritage

After working for nearly a decade on digital collections and public engagement at The New York Public Library (NYPL), I joined the Wikimedia Foundation to help design a global strategy for collaboration and partnership with the cultural sector. The creation of this new role at the Foundation comes at a time when the Wikimedia movement is undertaking an immense, participatory strategic planning process asking what we want to build or achieve by the year 2030. As part of this, we are taking stock of years of organic collaboration led by Wikimedian volunteers and affiliate organizations with galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (aka GLAMs), as well as other knowledge institutions and partners. This collaboration has been vibrant, innovative, and productive, occasionally even transformative. But there is a growing recognition in the Wikimedia community that much remains to be done in order to make “GLAM-Wiki” collaboration more accessible, equitable, consistent, useful, sustainable, and globally interlinked. There is a parallel opportunity for reflection by GLAM institutions: to assess where decades of digitization and digital transformation have got us, to celebrate the many things achieved, but also to acknowledge the potential still not reached. And out of these reflections, a question: what more could we be doing together?

Moving from NYPL to Wikimedia — from a single memory institution to a global social movement dedicated to free knowledge — has been a big perspective shift to say the least. Long a supporter and user of Wikimedia projects, I was not a deep contributor, and so in

many ways starting this job has been a tumble down a rabbit hole, disrupting and re-centering much of what I thought I knew about building digital libraries, wrangling institutional knowledge, and engaging diverse publics around digital heritage. In this talk, I'll reflect on the journey I've taken, share some initial discoveries and observations from my first year as a Wikimedian, and propose an emerging vision for where our communities, working together in a deeper and more abiding way, could go next.

Bio:

Ben Vershbow is lead programs manager for libraries, education, and cultural heritage at the Wikimedia Foundation, the U.S.-based nonprofit which supports Wikipedia and more than a dozen other open knowledge projects. Previously, Ben worked for eight years at the New York Public Library where he founded NYPL Labs, a digital innovation program that led a wide range of digitization, open data, and crowdsourcing initiatives. Prior to that, Ben was editorial director at the Institute for the Future of the Book, a think tank and interactive studio exploring networked forms of reading, writing, and scholarship.