Land of 10,000 Facts: Minnesota's New Digital Encyclopedia

Field Report by Molly Huber

MNopedia is the recently created, born digital encyclopedia of the state of Minnesota. It is a project of the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS), the state's leading cultural heritage institution and one of the largest and oldest historical societies in the nation. The MNHS has been in existence since 1849 and tells the story of Minnesota's past through exhibitions, extensive libraries and collections, twenty-six historic sites, educational programs, book publishing, and both financial and in-kind assistance to county and local historical societies throughout the state. It provides a strong base for an encyclopedia to grow from.

MNopedia is unusual in being the product of a single organization. Most comparable encyclopedias are joint projects between local cultural organizations, sometimes a historical society, but also universities, humanities councils, state archives and the like. The MNHS has been able to fund the project so far with money available from Minnesota's Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund, a special statewide fund established in 2008 by taxpayers to create new initiatives, projects that organizations would not be able to fund on their own. An encyclopedia seemed like a fitting and worthy project, something that would benefit Minnesotans statewide, and enrich their understanding of their shared heritage.

The decision to create a born-digital encyclopedia was a reflection of new technologies available. Although the idea of a print encyclopedia for Minnesota had been kicked around before, it had never been realized, so there was not a pre-existing text to work from, as is the case with many online encyclopedias. As this project was getting off the ground, print seemed increasingly irrelevant, however, with the popularity of resources like *Wikipedia* and the vast changes in how people look for and obtain information. The planning team wanted *MNopedia* to be easily accessible from a variety of platforms. Just as important, the team wanted it to be easily updatable, and to engage the audience directly.

MNopedia began in February 2010. We took a year to plan, both content and structure, before starting to build. To get an idea of what others were already doing, we conducted a comparative review of other United States and international encyclopedia efforts, both print and digital. The *MNopedia* team was assisted in this review by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (CHNM) based in Washington DC. They were chosen as a partner because of their knowledge of the field. The first half of 2010 was spent on this review and in building a conceptual model of best practices. The *MNopedia* team connected with the Internet Digital Encyclopedia Alliance (IDEA) during the planning process as well because of their work defining common encyclopedia standards. IDEA is an affinity group of the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH), consisting of AASLH staff and staff from digital encyclopedias throughout the United States. The group received a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant to create a white paper outlining best practices for the growing field of digital encyclopedias, which was published in 2012. In starting our project later than some of the others, we benefitted from their experience.

During our planning process, a great deal of serious thought was given to content and content development. An encyclopedia is a vehicle to communicate information, and content is our main product, which can be delivered in different ways. Our website, mnopedia.org, is the primary delivery method and only one so far, but the content was designed to be portable and we may add

other platforms as we grow and develop. Thinking about it from this perspective, we wanted to create a carefully curated, authoritative resource that was nevertheless vibrant and engaging, building upon the MNHS's reputation as a respected historical organization whose work can be trusted.

At the same time, the team wanted to capture some of the community engagement seen around resources such as *Wikipedia* and similar projects. We purposefully connected with wikipedians involved in the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) initiative to see where we might learn from them and where we might be a source of good information that could later be disseminated to *Wikipedia's* global audience. This was part of the reason that all of our content created in-house, and the majority of it overall, is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC by SA), making it easily shareable from a copyright perspective. We also built in the ability to comment on every article, set up a discussion forum where readers could answer our questions or propose some of their own, and encouraged site visitors to contact us directly. We also established a social media presence on Twitter and Facebook, with the links prominently displayed on the site.

To present the content, we created rich entry packages, going beyond text to include multimedia and extended bibliographic resources. These packages were designed to have many points of entry for users, and to be interconnected, creating a networked resource. It has been great to be able to take advantage of the different ways to present information that being digital affords. Each entry has a short body of text, providing a comprehensive overview of the topic at hand, as one would expect from the classic encyclopedia format. In addition to that, however, there is at least one image for each entry, and usually more. We often have relevant audio and video files as well. Each entry also has two bibliographic sections; one containing the sources used by the author in writing the article, and then a second, related resources section which contains primary and secondary sources, identified as such, for those wanting to learn more. These have direct links to the resource where available, such as digitized journal articles or newspapers. We wanted to capitalize on the richness and pure volume of information available over the internet, but still provide a guided experience by carefully selecting what is included and plugging it into a clearly defined structure that is the same for each article.

We also were very strategic in how we built MNopedia. The digital infrastructure was constructed in the first half of 2011. After evaluating other models, the decision was made to be open source, which the team felt would be easier to maintain and update as needed. We were fortunate enough to have an in-house team of developers and designers, who explored and evaluated many different modules with different functionalities to get at what we thought would work best for what we needed and what we wanted the site to do. With those pieces in place, and a starting core of thirty entries, MNopedia was launched in August 2011.

The August 2011 launch was a beta launch, and the site was clearly identified as such. We launched in a beta stage to benefit from public input and testing early on, so that aspects that did not work as well could more easily be changed, again taking advantage of the flexibility of being digital. We commissioned user tests, conducted focus groups, and more informally asked our readers to give us their feedback. Adjustments were made in the first six months after going public, but for the most part we found that we had a pretty strong structure. The most consistent feedback we received praised the resource but desired more content, so our focus shifted from construction to increasing content production, where it has largely remained since.

One of the biggest changes in our content production since launch has been the shift from primarily paid, in-house work to almost entirely outside, community-sourced volunteer contributions. This was a goal from the beginning, as *MNopedia's* budget and paid staff are small, smaller than those of comparable encyclopedias, and the resource was not going to grow fast enough without more authors. We have benefitted from serendipity as much as calculated effort, however. Although there have been dedicated campaigns to reach out to writers through community organizations, speaking to interested groups and personal networking, many authors have approached our editors because they saw and liked the resource and wanted to contribute. Aside from helping us to grow our content base faster than otherwise possible, these authors also help us get at areas of expertise and local knowledge that it would be harder to tap into without them. Another expressed goal of *MNopedia* from the outset, due to the nature of our initial funding and the philosophy of the editorial team, was to lift up the often overlooked history held in smaller communities across the state. *MNopedia* provides a home for stories previously unknown and images undigitized, and brings them to a worldwide audience. The encyclopedia goes beyond the big stories everyone knows and provides something more nuanced, with more layers. Being digital makes this possible, as our space is limitless, unbound by a page count and printing costs.

We removed our beta designation in September of 2012, as our core structure seemed to be largely set, but *MNopedia* is still a young resource. We have a long road ahead, but are at a very exciting phase. The team is still exploring new ideas, for example, ways to make our home page timelier. For example, in spring 2012, we hired three web development firms from three different locations across the United States to brainstorm how they might deliver *MNopedia* content via an app or similar. Each firm had a distinctive proposal, some geo-located, some game-based, all intriguing. We spent the first half of 2013 refining parts of our infrastructure, to make the search function more robust for users and to make it easier for staff to publish the articles. Our work on the structure of the project will never be entirely complete, a responsibility and gift of being digital.

We also continue to explore new ways to enrich our content and deliver more of it. Volume is essential, and building that is on-going. Beyond volume, though, the team is thinking about what we deliver and how it is presented. Entries already include text blocks, chronologies, maps, and multimedia, but we regularly try out new tools for content delivery as they become available. We need to keep up with our audience and what they expect.

What do audiences look for and what can an encyclopedia provide now? With the sheer deluge of information available in the twenty-first century, people are looking for curation, to avoid being overwhelmed. Encyclopedias fill a needed role, as their function is to carefully collate and distill information down to its essential elements, and then communicate it back clearly and concisely as a cohesive entity. At the same time, people expect to get answers to almost any question very quickly, and encyclopedias can provide that too. In *MNopedia's* specific case, our association with the MNHS and its established brand predisposes people to trust us as a resource. We reinforce the initial trust granted by the quality of our work and rigorousness of our process.

Encyclopedias are changing and there are exciting new opportunities to serve, preserve, and to share knowledge. We can engage with our readers in ways not possible before. At the same time, we are the guardians of a certain type of authority, one that has historically been ascribed to this type of resource. It's a balance, and a tricky one at times. However, there is room to change and grow, both for *MNopedia* specifically and for encyclopedias overall. From what I have

seen and experienced, I think things will keep moving, and the field will continue to transform. Our task as scholars, writ-ers, editors, and people interested in information and its dissemination is to keep up.

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