

Using a Wiki to Publish a Research Guide

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Unlike most academic disciplines, the field of forced migration studies has lacked a guide to the reference literature. Filling this gap was the task I set for myself when I was awarded a Carnegie-Whitney grant from the American Library Association (ALA). I assumed that the finished product would be distributed as a book, and I pursued various publishers accordingly. However, as the project advanced, I began to consider the advantages of an electronic publication over a print one. In the end, I elected to launch the guide online, using a rather untraditional format—a wiki. In this article, I present a case study that documents my use of a wiki to “publish” a typical library reference source for the forced migration information community.

What is Forced Migration?

Forced migration encompasses the movements of people displaced by conflict (refugees and internally displaced persons), by disasters (both natural and human-made), and by large-scale development projects (such as dams). Those who investigate this phenomenon look into the causes and consequences of forced migration and try to better understand the experiences of the people impacted by it. The study of forced migration has a strong policy focus—decisions affecting the status and livelihoods of forced migrants are made by government bodies and international agencies—and a significant field orientation—forced migrants are often the beneficiaries of emergency relief and humanitarian assistance.

These diverse groups produce an equally diverse literature: grey and academic, print and electronic, multidisciplinary and multilingual. Forced migration studies is a relatively young field, but its publication base, including reference sources, is growing rapidly.

The Online Nature of Forced Migration Literature

I set out to compile a guide that would facilitate access to these reference sources and provide support to new researchers not familiar with the kinds of literature and information resources available. In the guide I described both electronic- and print-based resources. I also highlighted the various access options for the materials I described. In addition to URLs for online resources, I provided URLs for Worldcat entries, publishers, journal web sites, and so forth for items not available in full-text online.

More resources were freely accessible online than I anticipated. In part, this is explained by the predominance of grey literature and materials produced by policy makers and practitioners. Yet even the literature one normally expects to find primarily in print—academic journal literature and books—was also offered in electronic format, at no cost, to a much greater degree than I expected. As a result, the guide referenced quite a few web addresses.

This online emphasis was the first question mark raised regarding my plan to publish the guide as a book. My initial reaction was that the problem of keeping URLs current or providing updates could be addressed with an online counterpart or supplement to a print publication. This approach is often used with library publications (see, for example, the book companion web sites at Libraries Unlimited).

In the online context, though, it is not just URLs that change. Resources themselves are often in flux: Sites re-organize, levels of access change, systems are overhauled. This fluidity impacts the bibliographic descriptions of resources as well, not just the validity of their web locations. Should an online counterpart to a book also display revised citations and abstracts? How quickly would readers tire of having to go back and forth from book to online counterpart? Why not just go completely online?

Publishing Online

Ultimately, this is what I decided to do, and I began to investigate appropriate options. I had already published several guides on web sites (see, e.g., "Guide to International Refugee Law Resources on the Web" and "Guide to Forced Migration Resources on the Web"). This involved providing the content to someone else to publish, namely LLRX.com and Forced Migration Online (FMO). Easy enough! No technical expertise required on my part, but the downside was lack of direct control over editing and adding new content. I was increasingly interested in producing my guide as a hybrid resource, something that could accommodate a "guide as book" as well as "guide as database." In other words, I wanted to be able to present the guide as a bibliography comprised of different sections with lists of annotated references (like the traditional guide to literature), and I also wanted to harness the advantages of being online by placing these annotated references into a repository and providing access to them in myriad ways.

Identifying an appropriate solution was contingent on the following consideration: I am a solo non-techie information specialist not attached to an institution. Therefore, I needed a free, hosted service that did not require technical expertise beyond being able to decipher basic HTML coding.

Options

The next step was to review the literature for solutions adopted by other librarians. A number of papers and blog posts discussed a related challenge, that of managing and updating web-based library subject and research guides (see Boeninger, 2006a; Corrado and Frederick, 2008; Dodson, 2008; Farkas, 2007; Herzog, 2007; Newman, 2008; and Strutin, 2008). Subject guides generally provide introductions to specific thematic areas and link to relevant reference materials, databases and other information products offered at the library. As such, they have objectives similar to those of a literature guide—promote access to resources and provide research support—even though they are specific to a particular library's collections and less comprehensive in scope and coverage.

Suggestions for librarians seeking to move away from their static-HTML web pages were wide-ranging and included using del.icio.us bookmarks, launching subject-specific blogs, taking advantage of open source tools (e.g., LibData, MyLibrary, Pirate Source, ResearchGuide, and SubjectsPlus), subscribing to fee-based applications (e.g., LibGuides), creating wikis, and building on the Wordpress blog platform (e.g., CWIS, Scriblio).

Blogs vs. Wikis

Of these, blogs and wikis were the two main free and low-tech solutions proposed. I currently maintain two blogs (see Forced Migration Current Awareness and Researching Refugees) and I had considered starting a new blog to replace the "Guide to Forced Migration Web Resources" mentioned above. They are easy to use, quick to update and edit, and would have required no learning curve. However, because a blog's core structure is based on chronological postings, I did not feel it was conducive to supporting the kind of repository I had in mind. That said, they have been used to effect for bibliographic and

subject-specific information-sharing purposes (see, e.g., BlogBib, Library Blogs, and Scholarly Electronic Publishing Weblog).

Crawford (2008) provides a useful comparison of blogs and wikis, and when to choose one over the other. A wiki is a collection of web pages that one or more users can contribute to and edit. It has been described by its creator as “the simplest online database that could possibly work” (Wikipedia, n.d.). Farkas (2008) and Boeninger (2005, 2006b) have written positively about their wiki experiences. Farkas’ Library Success Wiki includes a sub-section for “Subject Guides, Course Guides and Resource Guides” that lists various examples of wiki-specific implementations. Coincidentally, I had signed up for an online course on wikis through the Simmons GSLIS towards the latter part of my project. One of the uses identified was subject guides, with Boeninger’s Biz Wiki given as an example. This wiki not only points users to relevant online resources (“guide as repository”), but it also incorporates research tips and more extensive research guides (“guide as book”). It served as a useful model for me and ultimately, helped me to decide to go with a wiki format.

Choosing a Wiki

MediaWiki is the application of choice for many of the high-profile and large-scale wiki projects out there. However, while it is a free software program, it requires installation and configuration. As mentioned above, I was in search of a hosted, low-tech wiki solution. My criteria called for an application that offered WYSIWYG (“What You See Is What You Get”) editing, technical support, and unlimited and ad-free pages. I also wanted tagging capabilities and other organizational options, such as folders or category structures. Likewise, the ability to search and to back up data were important considerations.

I used WikiMatrix to identify available wiki applications, review their main features, and create comparative tables. Three popular candidates that met my criteria were PBWiki (no ads for educators), Wetpaint (ad-free for educators with a school affiliation), and WikiSpaces (ad-free for K-12 classroom sites).

In the end, I went with PBWiki. I had used it to create a very basic test wiki during the online class I took (see Forced Migration Multimedia), and I found it easy to use, with plenty of organizational options, and a clean look.

Building the Wiki

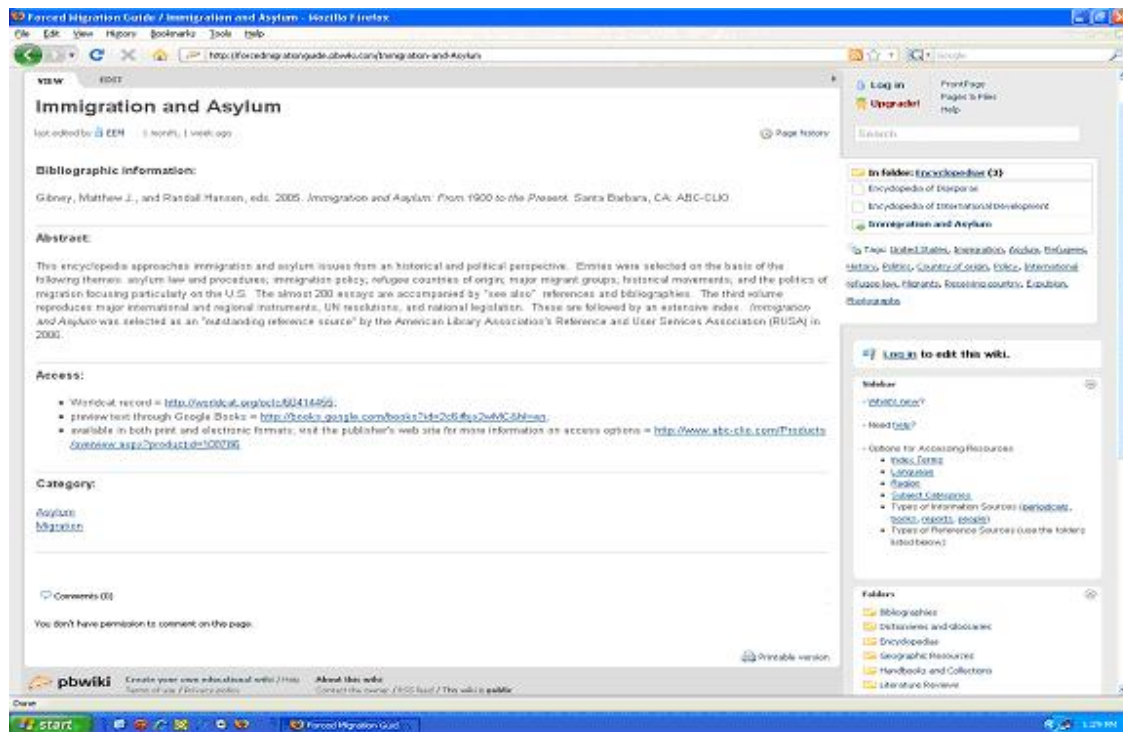
1. Creating records

I began by creating individual wiki pages for each information resource (see Figure 1). To simplify the data entry process, I designed a basic bibliographic template with the following “fields”:

- bibliographic information (with details entered in the Chicago style)
- an abstract (descriptive, rather than critical)
- access details (URLs for online text, Worldcat entry, journal web site, and/or publisher web site, etc.)
- a subject category (usually one or two, based on the Refugee Studies Centre library classification scheme)
- keywords (taken from the *International Thesaurus of Refugee Terminology*)

Figure 1

Example of an individual wiki page



2. Populating records

My bibliographic data were housed in an EndNote database. I had used this application from the beginning of the project to keep information organized and to generate final bibliographies for the anticipated print publication. It served me equally well for populating the wiki. I compiled a series of annotated bibliographies from which I copied and pasted details into the wiki's bibliographic templates. EndNote automatically produces citations in your format of choice, which meant that I did not have to revise information for display in the wiki. Keywords were entered subsequently as PBWiki tags, and records were assigned to subject categories.

3. Access options

Now that I had a repository comprised of over 350 records, I next set about providing access to the bibliographic data in the following ways.

By literature type:

PBWiki offers a folder option, so I used this to group like reference sources in order to provide quick access to "bibliographies," "encyclopedias," etc. The guide also describes key information sources (book series, key journals, working paper series, people). Since I wanted to keep these grouped together and apart from the reference titles, I did not place

them in folders, but rather tagged them with certain keywords, and linked to them separately from the main menu.

By subject:

All resources can be browsed by keywords via the tag page. For more general subject access, I used subject categories to group similar resources. This was done manually with the help of Endnote. I first generated bibliographies by category, then created a wiki page for each and linked to the relevant records, as well as linked back to the category page from within each individual record.

By region:

This was not applicable to all resources. However, for those that did have a country- or region-specific focus, I created a region index by linking to relevant tags.

By language:

Again, this was not applicable to all resources. However, I wanted to provide access to any different language versions of resources that were available. Using Endnote, I generated a list of multilingual titles, then created an overall index with the various languages represented in an alphabetical list, and links to the relevant resources.

Through the sidebar:

This is a PBWiki feature that is present on every page. All access options listed above are available via the sidebar.

By searching:

This PBWiki feature has greatly improved since I first began to develop the wiki. The search results now display the search term in context, which is helpful to determine relevance. I encourage visitors to use it particularly for author searches. The search feature also accommodates searches limited to tags and folders.

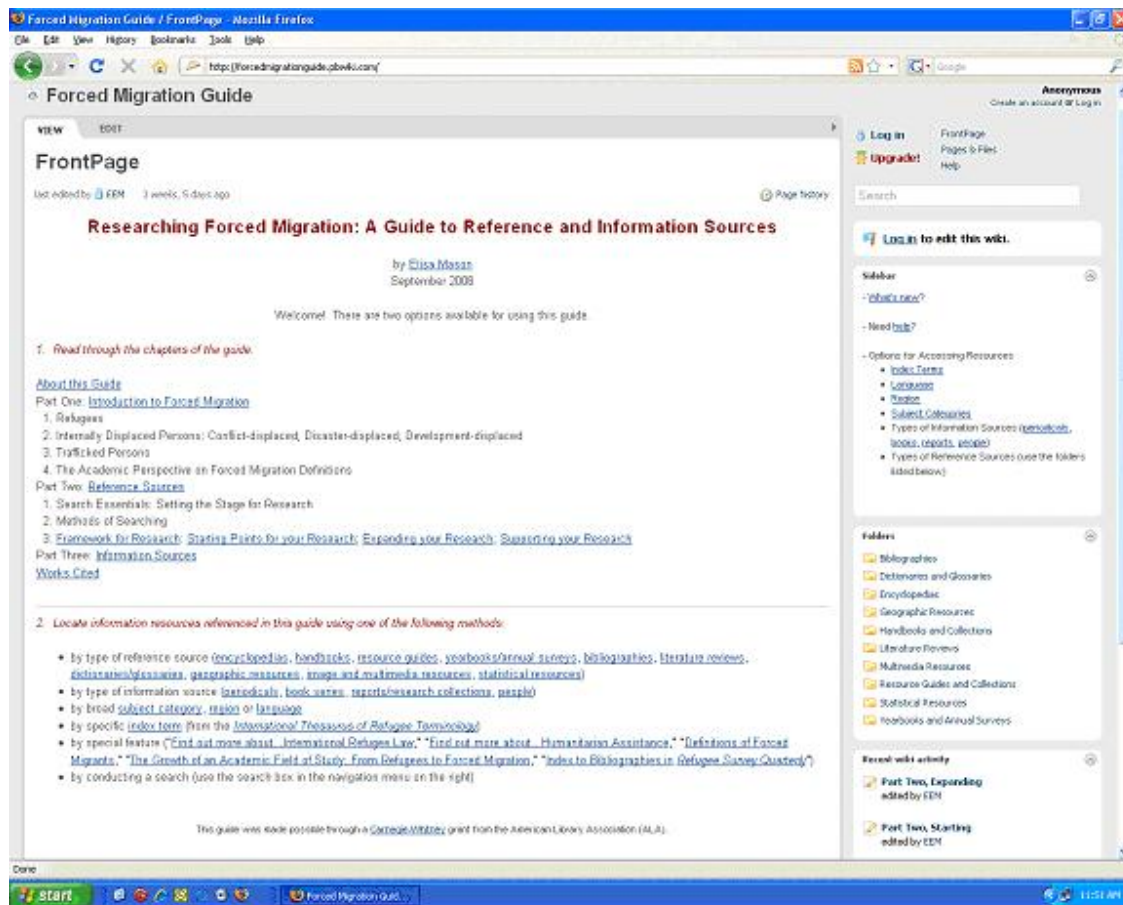
Through the "guide as book":

A final way of accessing information is via the actual research guide which I had drafted in anticipation of producing a print publication. The guide begins with a narrative introduction to the study of forced migration, then presents a basic framework for undertaking research in this subject area. The framework is organized around "starting points for research," "expanding research," and "supporting research"; each of these sections discusses and lists particular reference sources. A subsequent section describes key forced migration information sources. All titles of the resources listed link to the full record elsewhere in the wiki. Visitors have the added choice of reading through the guide chapter-by-chapter, as if it were a book, and exploring the resources as they go. Or they can browse/search through the resources using the options described above.

The various access options are presented on the guide's front page, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Forced migration research guide home page (<http://forcedmigrationguide.pbwiki.com/>)



4. Additional features

- “What’s new” page: lists new additions to the wiki and any major changes or developments. This page includes an RSS feed; page-specific RSS feeds are a feature recently made available by PBWiki.
- “Help” page: provides information on how to use the guide and take advantage of its various features.
- Mini-bibliographies: presented in a table format; these are referenced in the narrative portion of the guide, and they are also linked to from the home page.
- Anchor links for chapter endnotes: these were created using the HTML plugin option. PBwiki now offers a footnote feature that works very well. However, I elected not to migrate the endnotes over, since I could not number them sequentially across wiki pages; footnotes automatically begin with the number one on individual pages.
- Web statistics: I used another plugin to insert Google Analytics for web statistics purposes. PBWiki allows you to include a wide variety of Google gadgets.
- Backup file: PBWiki lets you download a .zip file of your wiki pages.

5. Other PBWiki features available

PBWiki promotes collaboration. You can invite other users to contribute to the wiki and set levels of access for each (reader, writer, editor). You can also indicate how often you want to be notified of changes made to the wiki, view recent wiki activity, and examine the history of every wiki page.

PBWiki also allows you to:

- add HTML
- display images
- generate a TOC
- plugin a chat room, calendar, slideshow, spreadsheet
- show recent visitors/number of visitors
- upload a video/embed a YouTube video
- upload files

Maintaining the Wiki

As the “What’s New” page shows, I have added over 30 resources to the wiki since the September 2008 launch. I check links on a monthly basis, and already a number have changed. Currently, this is a manual process, although I am investigating automatic link checkers. Regardless, the resource descriptions must continually be reviewed.

The addition of new features by PBWiki invariably requires action on my part. Sometimes a change will negatively impact the wiki in some unforeseen way, requiring me to edit or tweak things. Usually, though, changes represent positive enhancements that benefit the wiki, such as the improved search engine, page-level RSS feeds, footnotes, etc.

Future Developments

Several of the lists of resource titles in the “book” portion of the wiki are too long, requiring extensive scrolling. As an alternative, I will likely produce a more condensed version of the guide that includes the narrative with examples of resources rather than comprehensive listings. If I upload the “guide as book” as a PDF file to the wiki, I can then eliminate some of the access options listed on the front page. Ultimately, this will free up space and will allow the addition of photos for more visual appeal.

I am also considering inviting librarians based in forced migration information centers to enter resource descriptions, not only as a means to further populate the wiki, but also to offer training opportunities in the use of wikis.

Finally, I hope to investigate possibilities for integrating the use of the wiki into specific forced migration Master’s programs and summer courses.

Conclusion

Wiki publishing poses a threefold challenge: First, from the publication perspective, while you may be in control of your content, you are also on your own, with no editor, no marketer, and no designer on hand to assist you. Second, from the technology point of view, you must troubleshoot and devise your own workarounds. Finally, it is an ongoing commitment to maintain a living resource. In the end, though, the positives outweigh any negatives. Using a wiki to publish is an easy and useful way for a non-technical person to

present a lot of material to a wide audience fairly quickly. And a librarian can derive tremendous professional satisfaction in being able to offer a resource of his or her own making.

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