

Hacking Heteronormativity: Queer Feminist Media Praxis of Editorial Processes in Wikipedia

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**Abstract:** Wikipedia's overwhelming majority of male editors and continued emphasis on print-centric and rationalist epistemologies has resulted in numerous uneven representations across intersections of race, gender and sexuality. To expose and challenge these inequalities, this project subverts Wikipedia's heteronormativity and logocentrism by engaging in critical analysis of the encyclopedia's gendered and rationalist epistemologies and through critical feminist media praxis "hacks" that disrupt Wikipedia spaces. In so doing, this article, extends recent scholarship that critically analyzes technocultural formations of gender in digital media, including intersectional identities, and illustrates a conceptual framework of hacktivism as well as a potential productive model for the application of queer feminist media praxis. In particular, this article demonstrates queer feminist media praxis (Fotoupolou) as a framework for investigating digital articulations (Johnson and Simmons, 2015) of gender in social media by (1) unpacking heteronormativity in social media; (2) examining underlying epistemologies of design and architecture that structure heteronormative identities; (3) understanding the "queer potential of social media" (Johnson and Simmons, 2014); and by (4) performing an assimilationist approach to digital activism emphasizing the notion of "queer failure." Such an approach allows for the enactment of a mode of praxis that engages in both critical analysis and speculative re-imagining of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia through public acts of disruption, especially in terms of its cultural, sexual, and gender politics. This project ultimately calls on other researchers to employ similar approaches to more fully investigate the intersectional politics of digital communities and interfaces.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, researchers across a diversity of fields in the humanities, social sciences, and cultural studies have acknowledged the potential of (and need for) digital activism as a method for interrogating social inequalities in technology, culture, and society. Recent “special issues” in a number of journals devoted to cultural study further exemplify this trend. In the spring of 2014, for instance, *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion* published an issue focused on digital activism edited by Ben McCorkle and Jason Palmeri. In their editorial, McCorkle and Palmeri highlight the importance of praxis as an essential component of hacktivism: “Rhetoric is first and foremost a *productive art*. We can’t really analyze well what other digital activists are doing unless we have experience harnessing digital tools for activist purposes ourselves.” Such digital activist work is exemplified, for instance, in Jessica Ouellette’s “Blogging Borders: Transnational Feminist Rhetorics and Global Voices,” as she critiques the function of certain feminist blogging spaces to reproduce social inequalities among women and “marginalize the unique embodied perspectives and agencies of women located in the Global South.” Ouellette’s work demonstrates the necessity of a critical awareness when confronting digital spaces, including those that profess social awareness, especially when she concludes: “As writers, scholars and activists interested in the digital as a site for transnational engagement, it is imperative for us to continuously consider what is at stake when we engage in [such] practices, and how we might begin to question, push against, and revise those practices.”

The emergent movement towards activism as a mode of academic production might be understood through the increased presence of activism in online spaces by nonacademics. The continued role of social media and hacktivism in popular culture (think, for instance, of Anonymous’ commitment to progressive social politics or of the role social media played in the Arab Spring) has made it obvious that such activism can and does allow for progressive social change. The opportunities for such change have also made it clear that researchers can further adapt critical scholarship in public culture to take critical action and effect change. While some scholars have proposed a range of approaches for digital activism (Earl and Kimport), others have considered queer feminist theory as a hacktivist praxis (Hesse-Biber) to “explore a range of themes around mediation and gender/sexuality activism – and particularly how digital technologies, art and social media can present possibilities or impossibilities for social equality” (Fotoupolou and O’Riordan, 2014). Such work, as articulated by Aristeia Fotoupolou and Kate O’Riordan in a recent special issue of *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, has opened up a working space for what they term “queer feminist media praxis” - the subject their special issue centers

around. In Marxist and Arendtian terms, praxis “brings together theory, philosophy and political action into the realm of the everyday.” A queer feminist media praxis (QFMP), furthermore, involves “‘making and theorising of media towards stated projects of world and self-changing’, and can be a vital component of feminist and/or queer political action” (Fotoupolou and O’Riordan, 2014).

Additional queer feminist approaches to digital hacktivism also question heteronormative identities in digital spaces. In the summer of 2014, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (CSMC) called for a special issue on “Queer Technologies in Communication” (to be published Spring 2016). The most recent volume of *Technoculture* itself focuses on “the ways in which various technologies can be used for oppression and liberation” (Dorwick, 2014), including social media and activists objects. This work demonstrates how a queer feminist approach to media praxis opens up possibilities for a targeted digital activism confronting the heterosexism and heteronormativity of digital cultures and technologies. A queer approach, in contrast to mainstream digital activism approaches, is likely to be more focused on bodies, identities, genders, and/or sexualities.

In this article, we attempt to draw attention to scholar-activists already undertaking queer feminist media praxis, and to push this community into new directions as we demonstrate and theorize new modes of activism in digital spaces, using the online encyclopedia Wikipedia as a particularly productive case study. Following this movement and the recent special section in *Technoculture*, “On Gender and Sexuality,” our work demonstrates queer feminist media praxis as a framework for investigating digital articulations (Johnson and Simmons, 2015) of gender in social media by (1) unpacking heteronormativity in social media; (2) examining underlying epistemologies of procedural rhetoric and interface design that structure heteronormative identities; and (3) understanding the “queer potential of social media” (Johnson and Simmons, 2014) by (4) performing a digital activist approach emphasizing a notion of “queer failure.” Such an approach allows for the enactment of a mode of praxis that engages in both critical analysis and speculative re-imagining of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, especially in terms of its cultural, sexual, and gender politics and how those politics are complicit in its adoption of Western rationalist epistemologies. In so doing, this article, extends recent scholarship that critically analyzes technocultural formations of gender in digital media, including intersectional identities, and illustrates a conceptual framework of and for hacktivism.

First, we introduce previous approaches to engage and interrogate Wikipedia’s troubled politics in order to highlight some its major exclusionary functions. Second, we review recent literature on digital hacktivism and interventions that re-vision heteronormative identities, paying

particular attention to the tradition of cyberfeminism. Given these approaches, this article proposes queer feminist media praxis as a mode of digital hacktivism, and identifies three conceptual resources through which queer feminist media praxis accomplishes digital hacktivism: queer failure, critical analysis, and speculative praxis. Such conceptual resources are not forwarded as exhaustive conclusion to the possibilities of QFMP, but rather as an initial exploration of where such theorization can take us. We also see this project as calling for more theorization, conceptualization, and investigation of queer feminist media praxis examining digital articulations of intersectional identities.

Our recognition that this approach is an especially productive one through which to examine the politics of access and representation emerges from the critical realization that Wikipedia's overwhelmingly male editor base brings about massive disparities of representation of already marginalized gender and sexual identities. We acknowledge that our interrogation of Wikipedia represents only one way to employ hacktivism as a queer-feminist praxis, yet also view the encyclopedia as a significant subject of study because of its dominance in this post-Britannica moment.

In the last few years, many projects have emerged to address Wikipedia's gender gap. "Edit-a-Thons" devoted to enlarging the encyclopedia's representation of women artists, for instance ("Eyebeam"), and initiatives within the encyclopedia itself, such as Wikiproject LGBT<sup>1</sup> have begun to tackle the androcentric and heteronormative coverage of topics in Wikipedia. But ultimately, Wikipedia's gender gap is only one symptom of a larger systemic failure to both represent and give access to the multicultural, multi-vocal demographic the encyclopedia envisions in its "global" rhetoric. Collecting "the sum of all human knowledge" has, so far, been a project taken on by predominantly young, white, western males.

In "Wiki Space: Palimpsests and the Politics of Exclusion," Mark Graham acknowledges the exclusionary functions of Wikipedia beyond the gender gap as it represents, and fails to represent, global geographies. Recognizing the dominance of Wikipedia as "de facto global reference of dynamic knowledge," Graham argues that the site's construction of geographic knowledge, "how places are represented and made visible (or invisible) in [the encyclopedia] has a potentially immense bearing on the ways that people interact with those same places culturally, economically,

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<sup>1</sup> Wikiprojects are task force groups devoted to expanding and developing specific content areas in the encyclopedia. They share common goals and help each other to improve the encyclopedia's representation of a particular topic.

and politically (269). Using the encyclopedia's own system of geo-tagging articles, Graham's analysis of Wikipedia illustrates the massive disparities in representation between Western geographies and the places of the Global South. Even more troubling, Graham's findings also show how, when non-Western locations are represented, they are often written about from an outsider (Westerner) perspective. In other words, a place's people have no voice in that place's representation. Graham uses the term "uneven" to characterize the information politics of the encyclopedia and to challenge the accepted notion that it is unbiased, claiming: "Wikipedia is characterized by uneven geographies, uneven directions, and uneven politics influencing the palimpsests of place" (271).

Such unevenness is further evident when it comes to the encyclopedia's representation of queer and LGBTQ subjects, issues, and identities. As a global reference source that is edited primarily by white western males, the encyclopedia's treatment and coverage of topics related to women's and LGBTQ identities is more than "uneven," as Graham has called Wikipedia's representation of the global South. In many cases, entries are underdeveloped or even completely absent. Such marginalization through absence highlights the inescapable irony of the Wikipedia project. As an encyclopedia, it is dedicated to and draws from the Enlightenment features of the genre: "gathering the sum of all human knowledge and distributing it freely to every person on the planet" (Wales). Yet such a project is limited in that it neglects a number of already marginalized identities and subjects. As Noopur Raval has written in "The Encyclopedia Must Fail! -- Notes on Queering Wikipedia,"

This was perhaps my first encounter with the absolute paradox of open: making a platform open access does not automatically translate to equality of participation, ease of access, or cultural acceptance of the medium. The question remains: where does one start? Does one wait for the these thousands of un-become (those who cannot participate and cannot be recognized) digital citizens standing in the shadows to gradually emerge and adopt new technologies or does one rework the project's imagination to make space for various stakeholders who may not speak/write and document in the same way? (Raval, n. pag.)

Like Graham, Raval attends to citizens of the global south, whose access to digital technologies is not readily available. Yet she also realizes the intersectionalities apparent in their treatment and the encyclopedia's silencing of queer and women's voices as a result of its homogenous editor base. Through a realization of the systemic nature of these problems, Raval also acknowledges that they cannot be overcome easily, which is perhaps immediately recognizable in

the “failure” of her title. Yet “The Encyclopedia Must Fail” also invokes and introduces J. Jack Halberstam’s notion of queer failure as a potential method of disrupting the false narrative of the “Free and Open-Source Software” (FOSS) movement. Wikipedia’s employment of enlightenment rhetoric, “the free encyclopedia anyone can edit,” obscures its own ideological inconsistencies and failures to represent a broader swathe of human knowledge. Such inconsistencies become even more conspicuous when examined through the lens of queer and feminist theories of technologies, as applied in the following section.

## **2. Hacking Heteronormativity: From Cyberfeminism to Queer Feminist Media Praxis**

Researchers have drawn upon cyberfeminism as a resource for digital hacktivism “to reflect on the possibilities and obstacles for making and sustaining feminist knowledge in digital media, a context in which feminist knowledge production can be vulnerable and easily erased” (Fotoupolou and O’Riordan). Such engagements represent a diverse range of approaches, as Jessie Daniels acknowledges in “Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment,”

Cyberfeminism is neither a single theory nor a feminist movement with a clearly articulated political agenda. Rather, ‘cyberfeminism’ refers to a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture....Cyberfeminist practices involve experimentation and engagement with various Internet technologies by self-identified women across several domains....While there is no consistent feminist political project associated with cyberfeminist practices, within a culture in which Internet technology is so pervasively coded as ‘masculine,’ there is something at least potentially transgressive in such practices. (102-103)

However diverse, cyberfeminism has more recently been shown to consistently engage feminism and technology across specific intersections of identity, gender and sexuality. In the collection of essays *Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice*, feminism and new media intersect at three critical junctures: (1) sharing stories as a mode of social action; (2) reconsidering academic borders; and (3) engaging in technology to resist gender hierarchies. Similar literature also demonstrates a consistent impulse to imagine a form of digital activism that resists typical stereotypes about traditional “hacker” identities. In “Hacking the Label: Hacktivism, Race, and Gender,” an interview with members of the hacktivist collective Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), Leonie Tanczer shines a light on the diversity of hacktivists and their political causes. When describing their project, “Hacking the Black/White Binary” EDT member Carmin Karasic explains: “there is a need to create this body of examples of people who are not fulfilling the stereotype of the straight, white, male hacker” (Tanczer, n. pag.) Such an impulse is also consistent with examinations

into considerations of access and privilege, such as Rachel Hileman explores in “Defining Feminism in a Digital Age” as she claims, “this latest version of Feminism is buoyed by the popularity of technology, divided at times by the privilege of those who have access to the technology and information, and that through technology women are able to subvert the normative social gender roles” (3).

Feminist and queer poststructuralists (Butler, 1999; Munoz, 1999; Sedgwick, 2008; Halberstam, 2011) have identified the violence of heteropatriarchy and made the deconstruction of gender and sexual identity a commonplace in the study of cultural rhetorics, literary studies and communication, among other fields of study. Within these disciplines, and following these poststructuralist advances, feminist scholars and writers are increasingly illustrating the interventionist potential of queer theory for investigating the gendered logics of social media (Gantz, 2013; Tekobbe, 2013; Raval, 2014; Vetter, 2014) and media praxis (Alexander and Rhodes, 2012; Raval, 2014). *Technoculture*, itself, for instance, has published a number of works dealing with gender in digital spaces. In “Playing with Masculinity: Gender Bending in Second Life,” for instance, Kaitlin Clinnin examines the potential of the avatar, in such online virtual communities as Second Life, for “identity performances that are freed from bodily constraints with regards to gender, race, ability, and other identity markers.” Bradley Bond’s “GLOing Depictions of Sexual Minorities: Sex and Sexuality in Gay- and Lesbian-Oriented Media,” furthermore, demonstrates the growing corpus of media created and marketed especially for LGBTQ identities, and the possibilities for more diverse gender expression they allow. Although such projects focus on different articulations of gender, sexuality, and intersectionality, cyberfeminism is a common thread that binds these interventions.

Cyberfeminism is the locus of a queer feminist media praxis centered on “different modes of political action for social justice, enabled by digital technologies and social media, including theory, art, activism or pedagogy” that can address issues related to gender, digital media and technology (Fotoupolou and O’Riordan). Queer feminist media praxis can uncover the capacity of digital interfaces and communities to create and disallow possibilities of (gender) identity and can push us towards investigations of how such functions emerge. Furthermore, QFMP enables possibilities for re-imagining digital relationships, bodies, and identities. Working in this tradition in the following, we identify three conceptual resources of queer feminist media praxis that provide inventive possibilities for digital hacktivism: queer failure, speculative praxis, and critical analysis. Additionally, we attempt to distinguish between specific modes of queer feminist media praxis by identifying interventionist and assimilationist approaches.

### 3. Critical Modes of Queer Feminist Media Praxis for Digital Hacktivism

#### 3.1 *Queer Failure*

Recent cyberfeminism and digital hacktivism approaches exemplify the use of queer failure as a mode of critical intervention. Our invocation of queer failure reflects back on J. Jack Halberstam's employment of the concept as a means to disrupt and challenge traditional notions of success in heteronormative-capitalist cultures. Queer failure, for Halberstam, not only evokes and provides alternative ontologies in which we can refuse to participate in hegemonic versions of "success" - but also particular methods for interrogating those versions of success: "Under certain circumstances," Halberstam writes

failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.... And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (*The Queer Art*, 2-3)

Queer failure, further, enables a rhetorical vision of "radical feminist critique" that considers "how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore live-afresh" (Halberstam, 18). Such "re-seeing" encompasses a modification of some historical trajectory--here, now, and later--towards an inventive future. A "re-vision," as Adrienne Rich suggests (1972), involves "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction-is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (18). In addition to a rhetorical vision of critique, then, queer failure is "a process of possibility that opens something up" (Fotoupolou and O'Riordan, n. pag.).

Working within the tradition of queer failure as providing productive modes of critique *and* revisionary praxis, allows us to see beyond some of the technological optimism rampant in Western cultures' appraisal of communicative technologies. Queer failure, in effect, allows us to both come to terms with the ways in which (1) digital technologies perpetuate heteronormative social hierarchies and (2) fail to bring about (often promised) egalitarian and/or inclusive communities of practice. Our attention to the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, in this article, emerges from our acknowledgement of the ways in which the encyclopedia is lauded as collaborative, open access and inclusive - the "online encyclopedia anyone can edit" - as well as tremendously successful (especially by capitalist notions of success). Such praises, in their repetition of the techno-



utopianism of the 90s and early 2000s, omit and deflect the complex realities of the encyclopedia, especially its failure to include a diversity of editor voices and represent a diversity of knowledge.

### *3.2 Speculative Media Praxis*

Acknowledging the imaginative potential of queer failure also allows for recognition of its shared aims and boundaries with speculative media praxis. Similar to queer failure, speculative media praxis has been defined as enabling imaginative or revisionary functions of media for the purpose of liberatory, political actions. Furthermore, speculative praxis has also proven to be an effective queer agent. In “Speculative Praxis Towards a Queer Feminist Digital Archive,” for instance, T.L. Cowan, Dayna McLeod and Jasmine Rault draw upon Johanna’s Drucker’s concept of speculative praxis (Drucker, 2009) as a way of “rethinking the logic of computational design and reshaping the existing architectures of digital space in order to accommodate and enable the intra-active knowledges, feelings, social lives, politics and cultural productions that trans- feminists and queers value” (Cowan, McLeod, and Rault, 2014). Similarly, in “An Introduction to The Affect Machine,” Karin Hansson demonstrates a theoretically-informed speculative media praxis based on the affect machine, “a materialisation of the literal claims of digital culture and re-vision Facebook as a form of communism or ideal Marxism” (Fotoupolou and O’Riordan, 2014). These queer appropriations of speculative media praxis inform and support our employment of QFMP as a definitive method of digital activism.

### *3.3 Critical Analysis*

Queer failure and speculative praxis demonstrate the need to include both 1) critical analysis (as a method of deconstruction and acknowledgment of ideological function) and 2) direct intervention or action in order to imagine different possibilities and realities that answer the problems uncovered through such critical analysis. Accordingly, our analysis and methods of praxis that inform the following section are woven together through and alongside these dimensions of feminist intervention. In attempting to articulate a coherent notion of queer feminist media praxis, furthermore, we acknowledge the necessity of critical analysis as a central element of that praxis. Critical analysis allows for the discovery of the ideological functions of digital networks and other communicative technologies, especially of the ways in which these entities perpetuate and extend hegemonies of gender and sexuality. The realization that critical analysis must not be separated from digital hacktivist practices is also the realization that without analysis, digital hacktivism cannot be guided toward productive action. It is through the act of critical analysis, itself guided by the notion of queer failure (Halberstam), that we can fully understand and enact queer feminist media praxis as a disruptive intervention that both exposes the heteronormative logics of

Wikipedia--its complicity in rational, logocentric culture-- and provides inventive possibilities for digital activism that can interrogate and challenge such heteronormativity.

### *3.4 Assimilationist Intervention*

Taken together, queer failure, critical analysis, and speculative media praxis can be mobilized as disruptive interventions of political action for social justice through public acts of disruption. Such an approach 'hacks heteronormativity' in social media by "playing by the rules" of existing policies and guidelines, yet working directly with/in the community to challenge, subvert, and/or call attention to epistemological and ideological tensions and queer failures. Here we argue that these critical modes of media praxis can be used to "queer" Wikipedia. In our analysis and media praxis, queer failure (Halberstam) provides the conceptual framework for critically analyzing the encyclopedia as an open source and crowd-sourced "successful" project. With this critique in place, we demonstrate how QFMP opens pathways to "[feel] towards the impossible" (Fotoupolou and O'Riordan, 2014) by enacting an assimilationist approach to speculative praxis. We define assimilationist, speculative praxis as a critical mode of digital hacktivism intended to work directly with or within an interface's community to alter the interface's ideological landscape. In Wikipedia, assimilationist efforts to provide more representation of marginalized topics or identities are often accomplished through Wikiprojects.

Wikiprojects serve as task forces, dedicated to improving a specific topic area in the encyclopedia. Wikiproject LGBT, as such, represents a productive space for re/writing the inclusion and representation of LGBTQ culture into Wikipedia mainspace. The queer potential of Wikiprojects is especially evident in the way these communities collaboratively build and maintain tasks lists for the organization of labor towards a common goal (See Figures 1 and 2).

# Wikipedia:WikiProject LGBT studies

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia



**This is a WikiProject**, an area for focused collaboration among Wikipedians.

[Guide to WikiProjects](#) · [Directory of WikiProjects](#) · [Portal:LGBT](#)

**Shortcuts:**  
[WP:LGBT](#)  
[WP:GLBT](#)  
[WP:LGBT STUD](#)  
[WP:GAY](#)  
[WP:WPLGBT](#)

Welcome to **WikiProject LGBT studies**! We're a group of editors who aim to improve Wikipedia's coverage of [lesbian](#), [gay](#), [bisexual](#), [transgender](#) (LGBT) and [Queer studies](#) topics. WikiProject LGBT studies (WP:LGBT) brings Wikipedia users of various sexual orientations, gender identities, geographic locations, and personal backgrounds together to discuss and collaborate on coverage of LGBT content across Wikipedia.


WikiProject  
LGBT studies

Project navigation links

Main project page

→ Project talk page

Watchlist
talk

Members

Figure 1: WikiProject LGBT Studies

## Things you can do [\[edit source\]](#)

A lot of people join the project and want to help, but don't really know how. Here's a list of tasks that either need regular attention or fulfill the goals of our project:



**To-do list for  WikiProject LGBT studies:**

[edit](#) · [history](#) · [watch](#) · [refresh](#)

- [Bot report: Cleanup listing for all articles tagged by this project](#) [↗](#)
- [Bot report: Unreferenced BLPs for this WikiProject](#) — Biographies of Living Persons (BLP) have higher standards than other articles for references, due to the real-life effect they can have. (See *WP:BLP* for more information.) Please also note [our ongoing effort to reference and sort LGBT people](#).
- [Deletion discussions: Sexuality and gender](#) — LGBT-related deletion discussions can be manually added here until such time as the article alert bot service is active again.
- [Bot report: New articles containing LGBT keywords](#) — may need to be [project-tagged](#) if within scope, and added to [relevant categories](#)
- *Requested articles on: [LGBT topics](#), [LGBT people](#)*

Figure 2: WikiProject LGBT task list

Interested individuals use this Wikiproject to share resources and build agency to effect change by working within the encyclopedia's existing policies rather than overtly subverting them. In doing so, contributors to this wikiproject collaborate to effect changes in representation and coverage of marginalized topics in Wikipedia: in the case of Wikiproject LGBT, queer topics and people. The queer potential of Wikiprojects is especially evident in the way these communities collaboratively build and maintain tasks lists for the organization of labor towards a common goal (See Figures 1 and 2). In the following section, we further demonstrate the queer potential of assimilationist interventions by deploying a queer feminist media praxis comprised of critical analysis and speculative media praxis. We examine the queer failure of Wikipedia editorial process and use this analysis to perform public acts of disruption on social media.

#### **4. Queering Wikipedia's Editorial Process**

##### *4.1 Critical Analysis of Heteronormative Practices of Knowledge Production*

Once considered grossly inaccurate and undependable, Wikipedia began to gain credibility in 2005, when a study conducted by scientific journal *Nature* found Wikipedia to be only slightly less accurate than the print *Encyclopedia Britannica*. According to this research, "the average science entry in Wikipedia contained four inaccuracies; Britannica, about three" (Giles, n. pag.). In 2015, in its fourteenth year, it is becoming clearer to many that, as a cultural touchstone and public source of information, Wikipedia can no longer be ignored. As of fall 2015, the English edition contains almost five million articles ("Wikipedia: Size"). The entire encyclopedia, which includes editions in 287 languages ("List of Wikipedias"), includes over 30 million articles ("History of Wikipedia"). Wikipedia is the seventh most popular website on the Internet and receives "over 85 million monthly unique visitors from the US alone" ("History of Wikipedia"). The "free encyclopedia that anyone can edit," Wikipedia is one of the most successful collaborative writing projects to date. In a little over 10 years, it appears that the encyclopedia has already come to occupy a permanent place in the public knowledge culture of the United States.

The encyclopedia's "success" is due, in large part, to its revolutionary use of a social internet technology, the wiki, which has allowed for a new mode of dispersed production: commons-based peer production (Benkler). CBPP and wikinomics (the influence of wiki software on economic structures) has radically transformed the capacity of the Internet for large-scale, digital collaboration. Wikipedia, as perhaps the most well known manifestation of Web 2.0, remains the most famous example of this transformation. Furthermore, Wikipedia's open-access mission, evident in its policies and practices, is often praised as inclusive and democratic. The community's

ambition to “collect the sum of all human knowledge and distribute it freely to every person on the planet,” articulated by co-founder Jimmy Wales (Roblimo), further describes an ethic of accessibility and universality.

Yet such success, from a queer perspective in the tradition of Halberstam, relies largely on heteronormative and capitalist notions of achievement and progress. Most notably, Wikipedia has faltered to encourage participation beyond its mostly white, male editor base. In the most prominent study to date, the editor base of the (English) encyclopedia was identified as 87% male and only 13% female (Cohen; Glott, Schmidt, and Ghosh).<sup>2</sup> Such a demographic is problematic on a number of levels, but the way it surfaces most visibly is in the gaps of representation that emerge in actual content coverage. It becomes very difficult to discuss these issues without relying on stereotypes and overgeneralizations. But the fact remains that many subjects which male-identified readers might care more about—pop culture, videogames, athletics—are simply better represented in the encyclopedia. Not only are articles devoted to these subjects better developed and more mature, but there also exists more articles on these topics. Subjects that may matter more to female or transgender-identified readers, however, are often missing or underdeveloped. Noam Cohen, writing for the *New York Times* in 2011, describes the gap by focusing on how it often manifests in terms of emphasis of coverage:

With so many subjects represented — most everything has an article on Wikipedia — the gender disparity often shows up in terms of emphasis. A topic generally restricted to teenage girls, like friendship bracelets, can seem short at four paragraphs when compared with lengthy articles on something boys might favor, like, toy soldiers or baseball cards, whose voluminous entry includes a detailed chronological history of the subject. (para. 7)

Despite the somewhat heteronormative and stereotypical presentation, Cohen’s focus on the representation disparities revolving around gender represents a productive way to *begin* the conversation on social and cultural hierarchies of knowledge in Wikipedia. What Cohen does not realize, however, is the reductive and limiting function of viewing the gender gap as an isolated problem of the encyclopedia. In the analysis below, we recognize the intersectionality of the gender gap with other problems arising from the encyclopedia’s editor demographic. We invoke revision, process, and collaboration, the three dimensions of feminist intervention proposed by Fotoupolou

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<sup>2</sup> The “opt-in” survey methods of this study were challenged by Benjamin Mako Hill and Aaron Shaw in a 2013 article “The Wikipedia Gender Gap Revisited: Characterizing Survey Response Bias With Propensity Score Estimation.”

and O’Riordan, within this analysis, in order to re-imagine Wikipedia’s gender and sexual inequities as a larger systemic and epistemological problem.

Wikipedia’s mission to gather and make accessible “the sum of all human knowledge” forwards an Enlightenment narrative that fails to consider how its own practices and practitioners fail to value identities and epistemologies outside of a western male and heteronormative paradigm. This failure occurs in three ways. First, the erasure of non-normative gender and sexual identities emerges as a condition of the dominant and homogenous editor base, as more males edit and thus control the content that is valued on the encyclopedia. Second, in its adherence to Western print culture (itself also an accompanying feature of Western Enlightenment), Wikipedia also marginalizes the knowledge-making practices of cultures with limited access to print sources.

#### *4.2 Speculative Media Praxis of Wikipedia’s Editorial Process*

Despite how much Wikipedia has pushed the boundaries of the encyclopedic genre, opening it up, for instance, to all kinds of previously marginalized types of knowledge, mainspace articles (the content most users actually interact with) maintain an objectivist, detached and “factual” linguistic register that perpetuates rather than challenges Enlightenment claims to “truth.” This register upholds a hegemonic and western phallogocentric notion of truth, reality and knowledge that has yet to be adequately challenged from a queer or feminist stance.

As a tertiary source, mainspace article discourse in Wikipedia is regulated by the sources used to verify knowledge claims. “Verifiability,” furthermore, is typically expected to emerge through the condition of a claim to fact being readily accessible in a published/print book. On a systemic level, such a policy immediately marginalizes cultures with less access to printing technologies, especially cultures where indigenous knowledge is maintained orally rather than textually. But what does the marginalization of indigenous knowledge cultures have to do with Wikipedia’s gender gap? The policy of verifiability, and its implications and effects as part of a larger print-centric epistemology, ensures that existing hegemonies of discourse and identity will continue. It is the combined result of a system that is at once logocentric, rational, and male dominated. In that it can only base knowledge claims on existing published work, Wikipedia mirrors western culture’s existing hegemonies of gender and sexuality, through its insistence on the possibility of a rational and Enlightenment project of an encyclopedia based on a single epistemological method: print verifiability.

What is perhaps most striking about this condition, furthermore, is the tension that emerges between the insistence of such a project and the ideological and epistemological possibilities of the wiki technology. Wikipedia’s “History” function demonstrates an epistemology that is at once

comfortable with the postmodern condition of a knowledge production that is constant, in-flux, and revisionary. Article histories reveal a record of knowledge making, and in doing so, reveal the very complex, disparate and incoherent processes behind the ongoing genesis of the encyclopedia. It is this visible process that allow for the deconstruction of the ideal encyclopedic project (the curation of all human knowledge) as a rational and possible endeavor. Attending to process, more than anything, allows us to see that it is not only the principle of verifiability that determines coverage and representation, but the individual contributions, the identities of specific editors, and their selections of sources that make up our largest reference database for “factual” information.

While Wikipedia’s adherence to print culture limits its possible epistemological diversity by failing to recognize diverse knowledge-making practices beyond its policies for “verifiability,” dominant citation policies may be subverted by inserting alternative epistemological methods in articles that are also strategically chosen for because of their subject and editor culture (Figure 3).

In our public speculative media praxis, the edits, which include both a revision to a mainspace article and an explanation of that revision on the article’s Talk page, focus on the article “Surr,” a traditional Indian game which is poorly represented in print sources. The selection of this article was based on its history of attempts by Wikipedian Achal Prabhala to use oral sources for its development. Prabhala’s efforts to include oral/folk knowledge in this article was part of a larger initiative to expand Wikipedia’s dominant knowledge-making practices so that it might better represent indigenous knowledge cultures with strong oral traditions.

Prabhala’s oral citation project asserts that the encyclopedia neglects to represent wide swathes of human knowledge because its policy of verifiability. Cultures that value and have long histories of oral knowledge, such as India, are especially neglected by Wikipedia’s insistence on print culture (“Oral Citations”). While Prabhala did receive support from the Wikimedia Foundation for his project, oral citations are still largely rejected by the Wikipedia community. The “Surr” article represents a prime example of this, as Prabhala’s original inclusion of an oral citation was quickly reverted (deleted) from the article. In this edit hack, accordingly, we revert the deletion of Prabhala’s oral citation (Figure 3) and leave a message on the article’s Talk page (Figure 4), explaining the need for validation of oral citations. This moment of praxis, whether or not it remains on the current version of the article, serves as a public disruption of traditional epistemologies in Wikipedia that omit indigenous knowledge cultures.

## Surr: Revision history

[View logs for this page](#)

Browse history

From year (and earlier):  From month (and earlier):  Tag filter:

For any version listed below, click on its date to view it. For more help, see [Help:Page history](#) and [Help:Edit summary](#).

External tools: [Revision history statistics](#) · [Revision history search](#) · [Edits by user](#) · [Number of revisions](#) · [Help:Edit summary](#) · [Page view statistics](#)

(cur) = difference from current version, (prev) = difference from preceding version,  
**m** = minor edit, **→** = section edit, **←** = automatic edit summary

- [\(cur | prev\)](#)  **14:38, 17 March 2015** [Matthewvetter \(talk | contribs\)](#) .. (3,181 bytes) **(+582)** .. *(Undid revision 645400735 by [Fifelfoo \(talk\)](#) See [Talk page for rationale for inclusion of primary/oral research for this article.](#)) (undo)*
- [\(cur | prev\)](#)  **03:13, 3 February 2015** [Fifelfoo \(talk | contribs\)](#) .. (2,599 bytes) **(-582)** .. *(Per: RSN [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable\\_sources/Noticeboard/Archive\\_115#Oral\\_Citations meta is not en](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable_sources/Noticeboard/Archive_115#Oral_Citations_meta_is_not_en)) (undo | thank)*

Figure 3. Edit History for “Surr” article displaying praxis hack.

## Talk:Surr

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The sources on this article are being discussed on the Reliable Sources Noticeboard. See [Wikipedia:Reliable sources/Noticeboard#Oral Citations](#). — [Nearly Headless Nick](#) <sup>{C}</sup> 10:02, 13 February 2012 (UTC)

I reverted the most recent censure of oral citations made by [Fifelfoo](#). I understand the issue of primary research, but in this specific case, because the subject cannot be represented well with secondary research due to the orality of the knowledge culture, primary research is appropriate. Per guidelines on "No Original Research," "A primary source may only be used on Wikipedia to make straightforward, descriptive statements of facts that can be verified by any educated person with access to the primary source but without further, specialized knowledge." ([#Primary, secondary and tertiary Sources](#)).

[Matthewvetter \(talk\)](#)

Figure 4. Accompanying commentary to praxis hack on article Talk page

The marginalization of specific indigenous knowledge making practices, such as the oral knowledge traditions of India and other cultures, demonstrates Wikipedia’s inability, as an encyclopedia rooted in Western epistemological practices, to enable global collaboration.



Of course, the wiki itself *was* originally designed to allow for productive modes of collaboration (Cunningham and Leuf). In its relatively short history, furthermore, Wikipedia has enabled large-scale collaboration that is virtually unsurpassed, especially in the history of encyclopedic projects. The encyclopedia's collaborative model has not, however, completely achieved the truly polyvocal and heteroglossic participation envisioned in this and other free and open source software (FOSS) initiatives. This is in large part due to its homogenous editor base. If collaboration is to achieve a mode of production in which traditional social hierarchies of race, class and gender are disrupted and replaced, collaboration must be invoked from a queer or feminist perspective. This perspective acknowledges that collaboration among a homogenous group of dominant social groups can never achieve the radical aim of empowering and giving voice to those oppressed and silenced.

If we are to imagine the possibility of a truly open access and globally representative project, we must also recognize the value of collaboration as a feminist mode of production that includes and invites a diverse demographic of writers. Collaboration among white, western males cannot achieve polyvocal participation that would allow the encyclopedia to more fully accomplish its ambitions for "collecting the sum of *all* human knowledge" (Roblimo, emphasis ours).

Accordingly, we invoke collaboration as a feminist endeavor precisely because any legitimate collaborative practice must displace androcentric and heteronormative discourses to allow marginalized gender and sexual identities to take part in language use and the construction of knowledge.

Wikipedia--despite its open access ethos and inclusive, enlightenment rhetoric-- continues to fail to represent a diversity of knowledge and editor identities, but this failure comes about in very specific ways. Acknowledging and discovering those through critical analysis provides the most distinct avenues for the productive and meaningful praxis within the network, specific modes of hacktivism to disrupt and imagine this community in different ways.

As a queer feminist mode of writing, collaboration strives toward diversity and inclusion as central motivations, while subverting the notion of the single-authored text. In Wikipedia, often praised as a model for collaborative knowledge building, consensus, rather than collaboration, remains a primary epistemology. Consensus, according to the encyclopedia,

refers to the primary way decisions are made on Wikipedia, and it is accepted as the best method to achieve our goals. *Consensus* on Wikipedia does not mean unanimity (which, although an ideal result, is not always achievable); nor is it the result of a vote. Decision-

making involves an effort to incorporate all editors' legitimate concerns, while respecting Wikipedia's policies and guidelines. ("Consensus")

Consensus is notably different from collaboration in that it works within a majority framework while following established policies. While we might imagine collaboration as inclusive and diverse, as an ideal formation of a text that incorporates multiple stakeholders and a multiplicity of viewpoints, consensus represents the more pragmatic method of achieving a product in line with a community's majority of stakeholders and established practices. Consensus as a mode of negotiation becomes problematic in Wikipedia precisely because of its homogenous editorial base. Consensus cannot (always) achieve a collaboration that includes a diverse range of identities and viewpoints.

To challenge the problematic effect of consensus and reflect on the (im)possibilities of collaboration, we describe a method of praxis in the following in which the wiki's Talk function is identified as a means to bring dissensus, the disagreements that are elided in mainspace through the process of consensus into an article's mainspace. The edit hack in question was deployed in the article on gender theorist and author [Kate Bornstein](#). To perform this praxis, we created a new section in Bornstein's main article (Figure 4) that summarized material from the article's Talk page, specifically the controversy over other editors' disagreement on what pronouns should be used to identify Bornstein. The act of bringing in material from the Talk page attempts to expose the epistemological debate between those who argue for adherence to WP Manual of Style (which insists on cisgender pronouns she/he) and editors that advocate for using Bornstein's preferred gender pronouns of ze and hir.

## Pronoun Controversy [ [edit source](#) | [edit](#) ]

---

This article's talk page has been subject to an ongoing controversy over the use of gender-neutral pronouns "ze" and "hir" over cis-gender pronouns "she" and "her." <sup>[19]</sup> While the article is currently written to reflect Bornstein's preference for gender-neutral pronouns, <sup>[20]</sup> such usage is subject to ongoing revision as editors continue to negotiate.

Figure 5. Edit hack to article mainspace

The insertion of this section, which describes the ongoing negotiation over the use of gender-neutral versus cisgender pronouns, draws attention to the objectivist facade presented in mainspace articles. By referencing and summarizing the discussion happening in the article's Talk page, this edit-hack attempts to highlight the ways in which ideological and epistemological

conflicts are often “hidden” beneath mainspace articles, confined to the less-trafficked Talk pages which are typically viewed only by interested editors, rather than general readers.

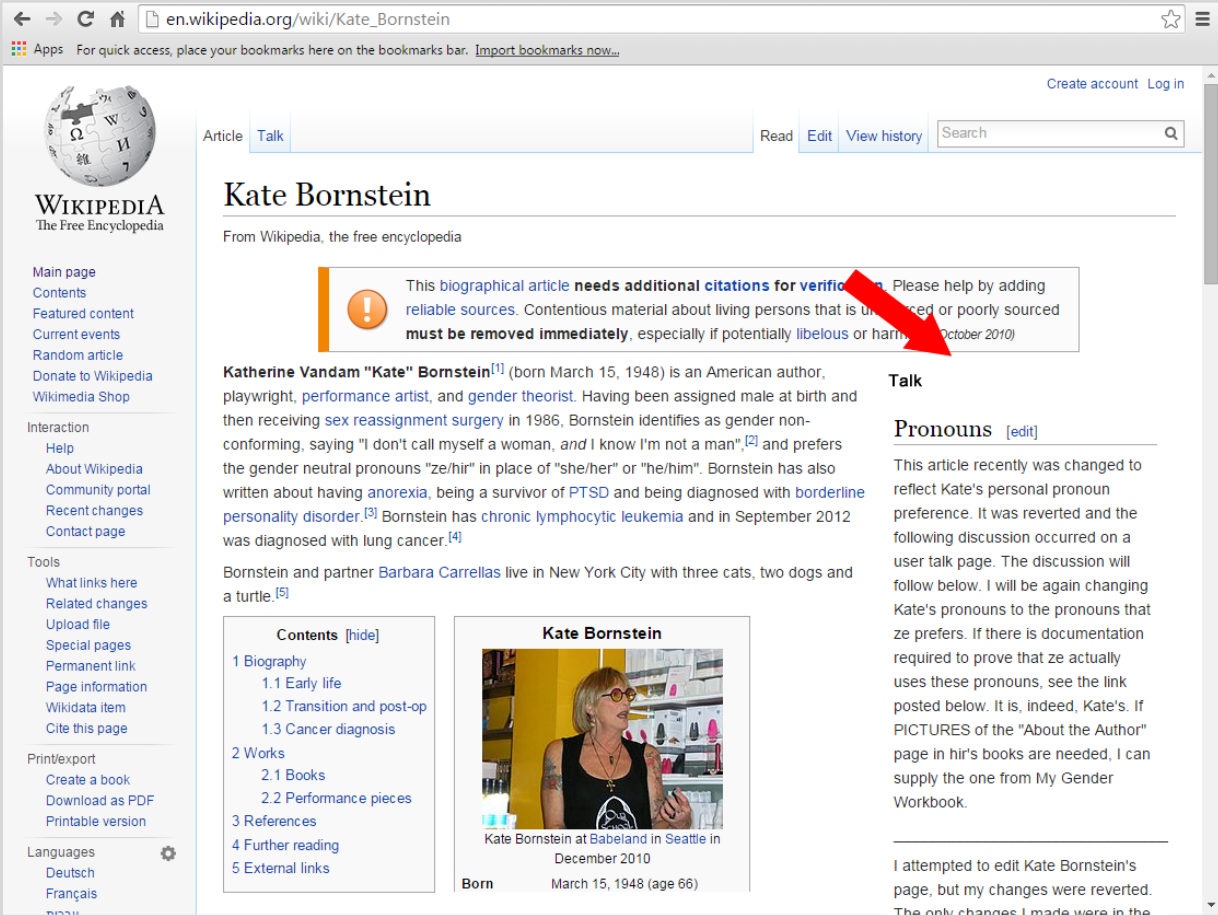
### **5. Speculating Queer Possibilities: Implications and Future Research**

Despite paradoxes of heteronormativity in social media, this essay illustrates that these sociotechnical systems provide pathways for disrupting social inequalities and the foreclosure of identity in digital spaces. Susana Loza (2014) demonstrates this point in her article on “Hashtag Feminism, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, and the Other #FemFuture.” Furthermore, while a number of scholars and practitioners have sought to redesign Wikipedia (Graham; Kvasnikov; Raval), this project subverts Wikipedia's heteronormativity and logocentrism by engaging in critical analysis of the encyclopedia's gendered and rationalist epistemologies and through critical feminist media praxis “hacks” that disrupt Wikipedia spaces in order to expose and challenge these epistemologies. Furthermore, the queer feminist media praxis demonstrated in this article answers calls for more experiments needed “to be repeated if [queer feminist] knowledge is to be produced through them” (Fotoupolou and O'Riordan, 2014). More specifically, it is our intent that a method of hacktivism that includes both criticality and praxis is one that could be repeated in further applications of queer feminist media praxis.

The specific methods of praxis discussed in the previous sections illustrate particular ways of hacking mainstream epistemologies in Wikipedia, epistemologies that, in their emphasis on logocentric and enlightenment ideologies, too often forward a heteronormative model of knowledge production at the expense of identities and methods already marginalized in Western cultures. The inclusion of alternative citation practices allows us to re-imagine the West's grip on legitimate knowledge claims through a print-centric epistemology that omits indigenous practices. Imagining the insertion of contentious discourse via the addition of Talk page discussion into the article mainspace, furthermore, interrogates the ways in which consensus can only always represent a majority of viewpoints and identities in line with existing policies and practice. The addition of Talk page content that demonstrates the dissensus around issues related to gender identity explicitly shows existing disagreements within an article's formation and, accordingly, allows for a more inclusive form of collaboration. In deploying these methods of praxis, we realize they are perhaps both permanent and impermanent in the culture of Wikipedia. Edits are easily reverted in the encyclopedia, and dominant policies and practices of consensus frequently prevail in these spaces. At the same time, Wikipedia also saves every edit through its History function. Our hacks, accordingly can never be completely undone, only hidden in the back pages of the encyclopedia's history.

Although this project focuses primarily on the politics of gender and sexuality in Wikipedia, there remains a need for further understanding of intersectionalities of social inequalities in other social media platform from a queer feminist media praxis perspective. In fact, Jessie Daniels, in “Rethinking Cyberfeminisms: Race, Gender, and Embodiment,” urges “those of us who hope that our work can and should speak to audiences beyond the academy to follow the lead of critical cyberfeminists and “hollaback” by engaging the Internet as a discursive space and a site of political struggle” (118). Other scholarship might move towards a speculative imperative that eschews instrumental or intentional changes in favor of provoking debates on the importance or failures of theoretical and methodological models. For instance, recent investigations of the gendered logics of Pinterest (Gantz; Vetter) could be extended by a queer feminist media praxis approach that allows for a revision of technocultural practices in light of critical theories and concepts of queer feminist theory, especially Halberstam’s notion of “queer failure” as it exposes intersectionalities of class, race, and gender.

As we have demonstrated here, speculative praxis invites critiques in order to further understand how projects using QFMP also illustrate “queer failure” might be further envisioned. We do not, however, claim our project as the definitive approach. There remains a need for further exploration concerning the range of approaches and applications that might be adopted. For instance, prototyping serves as a speculative mode of critique, as well as a form to be either critiqued and/or implemented. The former represents a form of QFMP that continues to open up possibilities for further debate and discussion, while the latter represents an instrumental view of implementing feminist and queer media strategies. Using prototyping as a speculative approach for queer feminist media praxis also opens possibilities for extending and moving beyond assimilationist approaches to digital hacktivism. In the case of Wikipedia’s editorial processes, prototyping might open queer possibilities for hacking heteronormativity by re-visioning the mainspace to include recent discussion from an article’s Talk page. Because these pages are normally “hidden” beneath the article mainspace, users rarely have the opportunity to experience knowledge production as a contested and ongoing discourse that privileges certain identities and cultural hegemonies and marginalizes others. Re-visioning the mainspace to include this section disrupts the objectivist facade of fact by revealing its messy and ideological production (Figure 6.). Wikipedia’s heteronormative processes might be prototyped using the current user interface, policies, and guidelines or re-visioned by using critical analysis informed by queer feminist media theory to develop an alternative reality of social media.



en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kate\_Bornstein

WIKIPEDIA  
The Free Encyclopedia

Article **Talk** Read Edit View history

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

! This biographical article **needs additional citations for verification**. Please help by adding **reliable sources**. Contentious material about living persons that is unourced or poorly sourced **must be removed immediately**, especially if potentially libelous or harmful. (October 2010)


**Katherine Vandam "Kate" Bornstein**<sup>[1]</sup> (born March 15, 1948) is an American author, playwright, performance artist, and gender theorist. Having been assigned male at birth and then receiving sex reassignment surgery in 1986, Bornstein identifies as gender non-conforming, saying "I don't call myself a woman, and I know I'm not a man",<sup>[2]</sup> and prefers the gender neutral pronouns "ze/hir" in place of "she/her" or "he/him". Bornstein has also written about having anorexia, being a survivor of PTSD and being diagnosed with borderline personality disorder.<sup>[3]</sup> Bornstein has chronic lymphocytic leukemia and in September 2012 was diagnosed with lung cancer.<sup>[4]</sup>

Bornstein and partner Barbara Carrellas live in New York City with three cats, two dogs and a turtle.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Contents** [hide]

- 1 Biography
  - 1.1 Early life
  - 1.2 Transition and post-op
  - 1.3 Cancer diagnosis
- 2 Works
  - 2.1 Books
  - 2.2 Performance pieces
- 3 References
- 4 Further reading
- 5 External links

**Kate Bornstein**



Kate Bornstein at Babeiland in Seattle in December 2010

**Born** March 15, 1948 (age 66)

**Talk**

**Pronouns** [edit]

This article recently was changed to reflect Kate's personal pronoun preference. It was reverted and the following discussion occurred on a user talk page. The discussion will follow below. I will be again changing Kate's pronouns to the pronouns that ze prefers. If there is documentation required to prove that ze actually uses these pronouns, see the link posted below. It is, indeed, Kate's. If PICTURES of the "About the Author" page in hir's books are needed, I can supply the one from My Gender Workbook.

I attempted to edit Kate Bornstein's page, but my changes were reverted. The only changes I made were in the...

Figure 6. Speculative hack to article mainspace

In our application of queer feminist media praxis to the politics of gender and sexuality in digital spaces, we hope to have opened up a critical dialogue on Wikipedia's gender politics, demonstrated possibilities for challenging and subverting social inequalities in digital spaces, and finally, encouraged others to take on similar challenges. Additional research and application of queer feminist media praxis might demonstrate the potential for this kind of practice to ignite social action and social change. For instance, research on digital activists groups such as *Anonymous* or methods employed in specific digital activism campaigns, could also benefit from a QFMP approach. Demonstration of these types of queer feminist media praxis are meant, more than anything, to open up new modes for an activ(ist) praxis of critique, one that allows for a vision of new impossibilities of queer failure in digital spaces.

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