

# CRITICAL DIGITAL PRAXIS IN WIKIPEDIA: THE ART+FEMINISM EDIT-A-THON

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Wikipedia’s gender gap, which results in problems of representation attributed to the lack of women and non-male editors participating in the encyclopedia’s production, is by now well-known and well-documented. A groundbreaking survey conducted in

2011, conducted by the Wikimedia Foundation, found that less than 10% of Wikipedia editors identify as women, and less than 1% as transgender. And while multiple efforts are underway to both understand and respond to the systemic bias resulting from this demographic, the problem persists. Many initiatives have sprung up in the years since these demographic statistics were released. One of the most popular of these has been the Art+Feminism Project, a loose collection of academics, librarians, artists and students who have worked together to organize over 280 Wikipedia “Edit-a-thons”, or hands-on editing workshops, since March of 2014. Such Edit-a-thons provide participants with hands-on Wikipedia literacy training and guide them in direct-action editing meant to improve representation and coverage of articles on women and the arts. Sustained attention to the pedagogy behind “Edit-a-thons” opens doorways for critical praxis among other interventions. One such Edit-a-thon, recently conducted at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, provides opportunities for theorizing a type of critical digital praxis that intervenes in the encyclopedia’s systemic bias.

The Arts+Feminism Edit-a-thon, in acknowledging the encyclopedia’s systemic biases and resulting gender gap, provides direct opportunities for participants to reflect on Wikipedia’s ideological biases, and to respond to those biases through direct action. Such reflection and action in digital spaces is characteristic of a type of critical digital praxis, a model for making writing interventions in public digital cultures in order to both better understand the writing activities of those cultures and make meaningful impressions with/in them. In invoking the term “praxis,” we draw from Paulo Freire, whose major work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* outlined a concept of liberatory pedagogy intended to empower the oppressed towards revolutionary self-realization.

A screenshot of the program dashboard’s tracking of participant’s e

## **WIKIPEDIA HISTORY AND THE GENDER GAP**

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”. In 2017, in its sixteenth year, it is becoming clearer to us that, as a cultural touchstone and public source of information, Wikipedia is here to stay. As of spring 2017, the English edition contains over five million articles.

The entire encyclopedia, which includes 293 editions, includes over 40 million articles. Wikipedia is the sixth most popular website on the Internet and receives “over 85 million monthly unique visitors from the US alone.” The “free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” Wikipedia is one of the most successful collaborative writing projects to date. In a little over 15 years, it appears that the encyclopedia has already come to occupy a permanent place in global public knowledge culture.

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. 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, exemplifies the impact 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, further describes an ethic of accessibility and universality.

Yet such success relies largely on capitalist notions of achievement and progress. The encyclopedia’s tremendous growth and productivity obscures its inability to completely accomplish its heteroglossic and open-access mission. Most notably, Wikipedia has failed to encourage participation beyond its mostly white, male editor base. In an early study of editor demographics, the editor base of the (English) encyclopedia was identified as 87% male and only 13% female. Such a demographic is problematic both in terms of the hostile culture it promotes in Wikipedia, as well as 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 exist 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.

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.

## **ENTER ART+FEMINISM**

A direct response to the encyclopedia's gender gap, *Art+Feminism* was founded in 2014.

Art+Feminism is a loose collection of academics, librarians, artists and students who have worked together to organize over 280 Wikipedia "Edit-a-thons," or hands-on editing workshops, since March of 2014. The organization continues to provide direct support of Edit-a-thons through grants provided by the Wikimedia Foundation, and was instrumental in the planning of a March 8, 2017, event at IUP. The authors worked directly with the Art+Feminism organization in the 2–3 months leading up to the event.

The Art+Feminism Edit-a-thon held at IUP was a product of collaboration between Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) Libraries, Women's and Gender Studies, and the Center for Digital Humanities and Culture. We envisioned an interdisciplinary event and encouraged participation from both students and faculty across campus. Because one of the main goals of the Edit-a-thon was to diversify editorship in Wikipedia and help improve representation of women and the arts, we especially encouraged the participation of cis- and transgender women. Our program lasted 3 hours and included an introductory talk on the importance of this type of work from the director of Women's and Gender Studies, a talk on the function and history of the wiki and Wikipedia from the co-directors of the Center for Digital Humanities and Culture, a Wikipedia training and practice session, and the introduction of specific reference materials by a library faculty member. These initial segments were followed by a hands-on workshop in which participants worked directly on improving Wikipedia articles related to women and the arts. Participants came to the Edit-a-thon expecting to both (1) learn how to effectively contribute to the encyclopedia, and (2) contribute specific content to articles on women and the arts. The event itself was

heavily advertised as a type of digital intervention for increasing general Wikipedia literacy and guiding the Art+Feminism organization's overall agenda of working to improve the encyclopedia's gender gap.

## **ON OPEN ACCESS AND FEMINIST HISTORY — THERESA McDEVITT**

As a librarian, I am committed to supporting and even defending library users' freedom to read. This traditionally has taken the form of choosing a variety of materials for our collections, even controversial titles, and resisting efforts to remove challenged books from our shelves. Increasing access to information, (including what is found through Wikipedia), that might otherwise be hidden by publisher's paywalls is a more modern way to make information available.

As a reference librarian, I am aware that students begin their searching with Google, and that Wikipedia entries are often the first sources that come up in their searches. Because Wikipedia entries are so accessible, any effort to improve their quality is very much in keeping with the librarian's mission. In addition, as a feminist historian who recognizes that women's history has often been hidden and women's voices unheard, I would argue that an effort to increase female editors and women-related content in Wikipedia is a worthy goal. People will be empowered by learning how to do this and will also be more aware of the structure, value, and limitations of Wikipedia.

I found the event instructive, productive, a great community building event, and even fun! Through the event I became an editor and added references and content to an entry on a female subject, as did many of the other participants. On our busy campus feminist scholars and students come together in a variety of classes, public lectures, film showings and receptions. Most often these events have a disciplinary focus. The result is that such events rarely attract a broad cross section of participants. This event, though nominally related to art, was viewed as a social action challenge and attracted those with feminist leanings with backgrounds including English, History, Art, and Business. That group of people would not otherwise have been assembled. I enjoyed seeing these people, who I know and like, but don't see often. I enjoyed the discussion among this community of writers working on different topics, but with the same goal. I also found the editing process itself fun. It was interesting and empowering. I enjoyed learning a highly useful skill. I also enjoyed the opportunity to share what I knew about a not well-known woman who I admire and have studied for years, but

that others might not have heard about. The event gave her voice, as it gave me voice.

Participation in the event helped me to better understand Wikipedia. As a librarian, I have strong skills in providing good references. I brought something that was needed to Wikipedia, as every positive contributor does. This realization, that Wikipedia is better for the next person when when we all contribute, is very important. We are already planning future events of this type, and I intend to work Wikipedia editing assignments and reflection before and after the activity, into my information literacy and women's studies classes.

## **DISCOVERING MATRILINEAL ARTISTIC INHERITANCE — DAN WEINSTEIN**

My participation in the Art+Feminism Edit-a-thon led to a revelation. Rolling up my sleeves and engaging directly with the underlying architecture of the software that supports Wikipedia, I was led, *by my interactions with the wiki's hypermediated content*, to an insight about artistic inheritance as an example of social networking simulated by the hyperlinked content of the wiki itself.

As a co-director of IUP's Center for Digital Humanities and Culture, my role at our Art+Feminism Edit-a-thon was clear. My orders were to introduce workshop participants to the principles behind wiki software and the collaborative ethos of what Ward Cunningham, the software's inventor, calls "the wiki way," then get out of the way and serve as an itinerant troubleshooter in the workshop, helping others edit Wikipedia content related to its theme.

But the wiki got ahold of me, as wiki's will. Before I knew it, I was editing a Wikipedia article about cartoonist and writer Lynda Barry, adding, to the very first sentence of that article, the role of "teacher" to the list of Barry's professional credits. Having made this small edit, this modest yet clarifying (and, I notice now, persistent!) contribution to Wikipedia's store of information about one of my all-time favorite artists, I figured I would quit editing at that point and go back to helping others make their own edits to Wikipedia articles about women and the arts. However (maybe because I, too, am a teacher), that word, "teacher," which I had added to that first line of the Barry article, kept tickling my attention until I found myself searching the Lynda Barry article for all mentions of teacher, student, education, apprenticeship, and so on. Doing so, I quickly discovered two mentions of Barry's undergraduate art teacher, Marilyn Frasca, whom

Barry credited in an interview with teaching her “creativity and writing techniques” that have sustained her in her work ever since her days at Evergreen State College where she studied with Frasca for two years. But although Frasca’s name appears twice in the article about Lynda Barry, it is not linked to another article about Frasca. Evergreen College got a link, but not Frasca. This leaves undocumented the precise nature of Frasca’s influence and undocumented elsewhere in Wikipedia the life and work of an an artist whose obvious significance in a chain of artistic inheritance deserves to be articulated and celebrated.

Thus was born an intention: to view the articles in Wikipedia as nodes in networks of influence and inheritance, and to always be mindful of our own participation (and complicity) in the conservation and evolutions of those very *human* connections.

## **DIGITAL HUMANITIES FOR DIGITAL LITERACY — KEN SHERWOOD**

Digital Humanities Centers are generally associated with exploratory or innovative research projects at the “intersection of computation technology and traditional humanities disciplines.” I wanted IUP’s Center for Digital Humanities and Culture(DHC) to be involved with this initiative, not only because of Art+Feminism’s importance as an intervention, but also to underscore how students can play a role in transforming humanities practices. Wikipedia is itself a DH project although, because it is so ubiquitous, we seldom consider it as such. Too often, classroom attention to Wikipedia involves cautionary exclamations about reliability, defenses of traditional peer-review, or simple prohibitions: “Wikipedia is NOT allowed!”

Students come to my classes tending to know that non-experts contribute to Wikipedia, but few have been prompted to really understand the contribution process, or to look at the discourse communities editing Wikipedia entries in terms of the relation to how knowledge is produced through others kinds of publications, platforms, and institutions. This is also a reflection of lingering disinformation or resistances on the part of some colleagues. So, for me, one unanticipated outgrowth of this first Edit-a-thon at IUP is the conversation it has begun to generate among faculty about how we can better engage and empower students as writers in digital domains. Throughout this event — students, faculty, and librarians collaborated, elbow to elbow, assessing the omissions in stub articles, identifying information to add and references to cite. We worked through the mechanics of editing, sharing the modest pleasures of having

made a contribution.

## WHAT WE ACCOMPLISHED

The combined promotional efforts of facilitators yielded 36 visitors overall. From this group, 24 registered participants made a total of 74 edits. Together, we edited content in 15 articles, and created 1 new article, adding a total of 3,450 words on women and the arts.

These statistics are made possible by the Wikimedia Foundation's "program dashboard," a web application that allows for the management of such events and the tracking of registered editor's contributions. The screenshots that follow demonstrate how the dashboard become integral to this kind of event.

The program dashboard keeps track of participant activity and compiles statistics.

## CRITICAL DIGITAL PRAXIS IN WIKIPEDIA AND BEYOND

For Freire, praxis is not mere "process" or mere "action" — it is both reflection *and* action aimed especially at transformation: "But human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action." (125). Such a definition rewrites the common Platonic binary that continues to separate thought from action, contemplation from action, theory from practice. Such a definition also prompts us, in 2017, to consider the ways in which we can build pedagogies that engage both our students and ourselves in conscious interventions in our digital world. Edit-a-thons provide opportunities for this kind of work, especially when they are prompted by critical reflection and realization concerning issues of ideology and epistemology in digital space. When organized in the academic setting, Edit-a-thons also engage both students and faculty in practical action that goes beyond the walls of the institution — that participates more fully in the public sphere, and that leaves a lasting impact in our (digital) world. And, while we're hopeful that this essay inspires *Hybrid Pedagogy* readers to consider organizing their own Art+Feminism Edit-a-thon, we also want to push for more critical digital praxis across the web. What are the digital communities and interfaces most present in our lives? In students' lives? How might we interact with them in ways are critical, empowering, and attuned to possibilities of social praxis? How might we re-imagine and re-build the digital spaces

we inhabit, and make them into more equitable and inclusive spaces?

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