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Towards an activist research: Is Wikipedia the problem or the solution?

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ABSTRACT

Is the internet a tool for democracy or the manifestation of the global digital divide? Using the colonization of the internet as a starting point, this article outlines some current issues with knowledge equity, asking if democratic open access products like Wikipedia are the solution or another manifestation of the systemic bias of society. Whilst acknowledging librarianship has its own colonial legacies to address, the suggestion is made that critical librarianship can provide a response in the form of library–based edit-a-thons and Wikipedia workshops. These show how the power of Wikipedia can be used responsibly not just for enabling critical information literacy, but as an instrument for activism. In considering librarian interventions done so far at the University of the Arts, London, the article outlines future practical possibilities for decolonization, as well as looking more widely at how to democratize information in open access products and the Western publishing that sits behind them.

The internet needs decolonizing. We know that there are many issues of power and privilege inherent in the ways knowledge is understood and therefore the ways the internet is designed and experienced. Although 59% of the world is online today, with 75% from the global South,[1] these diverse geographies of (potential) participation are not reflected or represented on the internet. Geographies of access, of participation, and of representation create for us a global picture of knowledge equity; and it's not looking good. In this hegemonic model, information production and use are yet another means of power formation and control.

Statistics tell a story. To use the term minority to label these communities would be misleading, because statistics show that such communities form the majority of the world. Marginalized majority would be a more apt term. We know that online content is heavily skewed towards the global North: it is created by or filtered through a Western lens.[2] Before we even arrive at the content itself we must acknowledge that most online information today is created and made accessible only through colonial languages, and, as such, is nowhere near multilingual enough to accurately present the true depth and breadth of humanity.[3]

The democracy of information is a complex issue, and one that people naturally looked to the internet to solve, but what could have been a tool for democracy has become a polarizing technological infrastructure, 'stratifying the social structure of the information society into that of the information elite, the participating majority and the marginalized segment of the unconnected and ostracized.'[4] Using such notions of the information society, as described by sociologist Petr Lupač, it is clearly possible to see that we are a long way from the global digital utopia one might have imagined at the birth of the internet. There are many complex contributing factors for this, which go beyond the remit of this article, although for a useful overview I can recommend Graham, Sabbata and Zook's '*Towards a study of information geographies: (im)mutable augmentations and a mapping of the geographies of information*'.

1. Internet World Stats. "Internet Usage Statistics." Accessed May 8, 2020. https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.

2. Mark Graham, Stefano De Sabbata and Matthew Zook. "Towards a study of information geographies:(im)mutable augmentations and a mapping of the geographies of information." *Geo: Geography and Environment* 2, no. 1 (2015): 88–105, 90.

3. Whose Knowledge. "De-colonizing the Internet." Accessed March 8, 2020. https://whoseknowledge.org/initiatives/decolonizing-the-internet/.

4. Petr Lupač. *Beyond the Digital Divide: Contextualizing the Information Society.* Bingley: Emerald Publishing Ltd, 2018, 135.

Open access: the problem or the solution?

Are democratic open access products the answer? 'Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human

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knowledge,'[5] Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia tells us. When talking about open access information on the internet, one is obligated to reference Wikipedia, the 5th most visited website in the world[6], and - with over 50 million pages[7] - the largest and most popular general reference work on the internet. Freely and fully available (unless, at the time of writing, you live in China, Russia, or North Korea) and free for anyone to edit, it appears to fully embrace the open access ethos. But a closer look at the people participating in this collective is revealing: 80% of the global content of Wikipedia is written by white men from Europe and North America, a demographic that makes up just 20% of the world's population.[8] Clearly, then, the global North is showing the greatest levels of participation; creating the majority of digital content, in comparison to the global South, who are contributing the minority.

As previously mentioned, the statistics do not reflect the geographical spread of actual internet users.[9] But even the lack of active participation in content creation doesn't tell the whole story. In the US and UK, 85% and 78% of content is created locally (by users located there) but if we look, for example, to the continent of Africa the percentages tell a different story. Less than 5% of African content is created locally.[10] As the non-profit organization Art + Feminism notes (in relation to Wikipedia content creation), when we don't tell our stories or participate in the ways our history is preserved, it gets erased.[11]

Wikipedia, through its format and design, inculcates a Western way of valuing knowledge and knowledge production - using eurocentric systems to measure quality of content. Reliability, neutrality and even notability are qualified through a Western lens, by a predominantly white male editorship who decide such things by *consensus*. In *Doing the work: editing Wikipedia as an act of reconciliation*, Danielle Robichaud, and Krista McCracken [12] build on work by Maja van der Velden that highlights Wikipedia's apparent inability to deal with Indigenous content, chiefly through its non-consideration of oral history as a reliable source. They further consider that its 'design does not allow for Indigenous communities to use Indigenous concepts and structures to tell a story and to present and organize knowledge.' The message conveyed is that Indigenous knowledge must be re-formatted if it is to contribute to the sum of all human knowledge. It is only legitimized once it is re-published in traditional academic sources, which then usurps the original information. In *The sum of all human knowledge? Wikipedia and Indigenous knowledge,* Peter Gellart and Maja van der Velden note that what written records of Indigenous knowledge that we do have were usually created by visitors to the community, merchants and missionaries for example, rather than locals. Therefore the knowledge will have been observed and understood through the observers' cultural lens.[13] There are gender imbalances too: roughly 15% of global Wikipedia editors identify as women. Data analysis and computational linguistics studies have shown that it has fewer and less extensive articles on women and point to the existence of gender bias in their biographical articles[14]. In addition, less than 20% of Wikipedia articles on important women have pictures.[15]

In a drive to create an openly accessible democratic product which benefits all, the very make-up, structures and processes of Wikipedia have served to further marginalize some communities and voices. This is systemic bias in action, acknowledged as a multi-faceted issue by the Wikimedia Foundation and the Wikipedia community, who may strive for neutrality, but whose homogeneity can't help but impact representation.[16] What must be acknowledged though are the numerous projects centring the knowledge of under-represented communities on the internet already taking place to tackle this within, outside and alongside the Wikimedia Foundation: AfroCROWD, Art + Feminism, Visible Wiki Women, Whose Knowledge, Wiki loves Pride, and many others. But this is an identity crisis for Wikimedia, in which they must continue to look at better ways to integrate marginalized and Indigenous knowledge ~~to~~ within their content. Can something like oral knowledge really be disregarded altogether based on its apparent inability to be ratified? After all, written knowledge has existed for a fraction of the time that oral knowledge has. Oral history is created with its own set of systems, processes and that all-important consensus as reached through a system of verbal peer-review.[17] Perhaps ultimately there could be a move away from 'published' sources and a re-orientation towards nominated local experts who function as reviewers connected, in turn, to a global network of the same. So, to return to the question are democratic open access products the answer? Probably not, but we can work with them.

5. Roblimo (Robin Miller). "Wikipedia Founder Jimmy Wales Responds." *Slashdot* (blog), July 28, 2004. Accessed May 8, 2020. https://slashorg/story/04/07/28/1351230/wikipedia-founder-jimmy-wales-responds.

6. Nick Routley. "Ranking the top 100 websites in the world" *Visual Capitalist*, August 7, 2019. Accessed May 8, 2020. https://www.visualcapitalist.com/ranking-the-top-100-websites-in-the-world/.

7. Wikipedia. "Wikipedia: size of Wikipedia." Accessed May 8, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Size_of_Wikipedia.

8. Whose Knowledge. "De-colonizing the Internet." Accessed January 11, 2020. https://whoseknowledge.org/decolonizing-the-internet-conference/.

9. Graham, De Sabbata and Zook. "Towards a study,", 96.

10. Graham, De Sabbata and Zook, "Towards a study," 97.

11. Art + Feminism. "Art + Feminism: About." Accessed March 8, 2020. https://www.artandfeminism.org/.

12. Danielle Robichaud and Krista McCracken. "Doing the work: Editing Wikipedia as an act of reconciliation." *On Archivy* (2018): 1–9. Accessed March 8, 2020. https://medium.com/on-archivy/doing-the-work-editing-wikipedia-d82e927adb9f

13. Peter Gallert and Maja van der Velden, "The sum of all human knowledge: Wikipedia and Indigenous knowledge," in *At the Intersection of Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge and Technology Design*, ed. Nicola Bidwell, and Keike Winschiers-Theophilus (California: Informing Science Press, 2015), 119.

14. Art + Feminism. "About." Accessed March 8, 2020. https://www.artandfeminism.org/.

15. Whose Knowledge. "#VisibleWikiWomen." Accessed March10, 2020. https://whoseknowledge.org/initiatives/visiblewikiwomen-2020/.

16. Wikipedia. "Wikipedia: Systemic Bias." Accessed May 8, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Systemic_bias.

17. Gallert and van der Velden, "The sum of all", 119.

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Critical librarianship: an intervention

Critical librarianship has an important role to play in the response - librarians have learnt to fix a critical eye on knowledge and its production. We know what results homogenous collections and spaces have on our user communities, because we have actively participated in creating them. Like the digital divide, librarianship is born of colonial legacies - we see colonization not only in the way our internet is structured but in the ways our libraries and museums are organized and structured too. In our endless quest for order we have overlaid our own technologies of power onto the material world of knowledge construction.[18] Critical librarianship acknowledges this and understands social justice as a core responsibility of the profession.[19] Emily Drabinski has outlined five principles of critical librarianship, the fifth one stating 'critical librarianship knows that the world could be different'.[20] How then, do we change the world?

In 2018, I was approached by a University of the Arts London (UAL) colleague Cassy Sachar (then Academic Support Librarian at Chelsea), about co-hosting a UAL/ARLIS Wikipedia Art + Feminism edit-a-thon, in the Chelsea College of Arts Library, part of UAL. For those not familiar with Art + Feminism, it is an organization and movement that facilitates Wikipedia edit-a-thons to improve their coverage of cis and transgender women, non-binary individuals, feminism and the arts. Being a novice to Wikipedia editing (but not to Wikipedia reading) I jumped at the chance to involve myself in what I thought would be a fun, one-off event. We opened the doors of the library to anyone who wanted to come (from UAL or the general public). The edit-a-thon was facilitated with wifi access, library resources, and refreshments. We had a laptop set-up for registering, provided help guides, and had pre-selected a small number of relevant artists indexes. The guideline was that all editing would focus on artists or practitioners who identified as female. Attendees were a mix of librarians, students and external researchers and artists. In interviewing attendees one, who identified herself as Cat, commented:

> I have a couple of friends who like to edit Wikipedia articles but they're all men … I've been reading a lot of histories of female comedians which is really empowering to me as a comedy writer … histories of people who may not have gotten much attention beforehand but still made major contributions to their field … Twitter is the main place where I find writers of colour or female comedians … it's really empowering seeing all these people who have experiences that are similar to mine, but prior to joining Twitter I had never had that, and so I want Wikipedia to reflect that, because after I find someone on Twitter, the first thing I do is look up their biography [on Wikipedia][21].

18. Emily Drabinski. "What is critical about critical librarianship?" *Art Libraries Journal* 44, no. 2 (2019): 49–57, 51.

19. Jess Crilly, and Gustavo Grandal Montero. "Editors' note." *Art Libraries Journal* 44, no. 2 (2019): 47–48, 47.

20. Drabinski, "What is critical about critical librarianship?" 53.

21. Alexandra Duncan and Cassy Sachar. "Episode 03: #FightThePower." *ARLISmatters.* March 18, 2018, podcast, 24:32. https://soundcloud.com/user-819912910/episode-03-fightthepower.

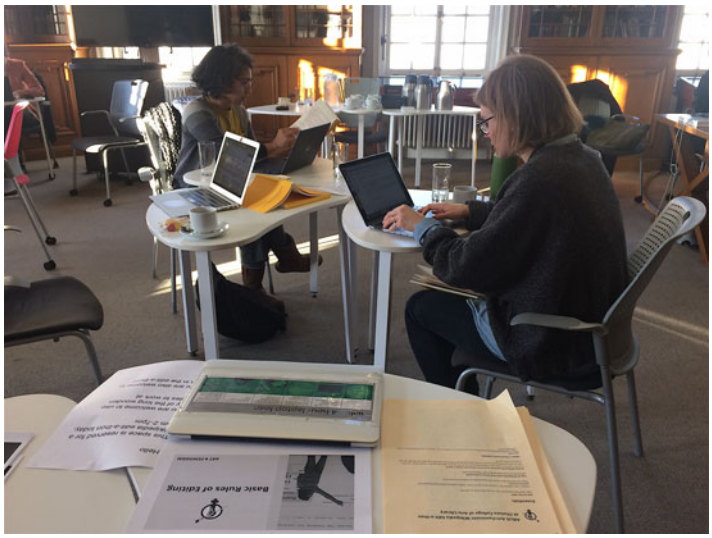


Fig. 1. 'Attendees at a UAL/ARLIS Art + Feminism edit-a-thon', 11 March 2020. Image courtesy of Alexandra Duncan.

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Seeking post-colonial democracy

In relation to the Art + Feminism movement, Siân Evans, the librarian who founded it, speaks of the necessity to go beyond the presumed neutrality of (white) feminism and consider how it has become the *default feminism*; a phenomenon that can end up simply serving as a continuation of structural oppression.[22] In this context, it is only a clear embodiment of intersectional feminism that allows us to approach some form of post-colonial democracy.

One particular resource allowed us to do this - *Recordings: A Select Bibliography of Contemporary African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian British Art* - a work published by the Institute of International Visual Arts (INIVA) in collaboration with Chelsea College of Art and Design. It documents the African-Caribbean, Asian & African Art in Britain Archive, up until 1996. *Recordings* documents the extensive canon of work created by artists, many of whom still have only rudimentary or, as Wikipedia identifies them, "stub" entries or nothing at all, despite often being well-known practitioners. The Chelsea College Library collections priorities have been shaped by the desire to document the work of underrepresented artists, which makes it a collection well suited for supporting edit-a-thons of this nature. In March 2019, I ran the edit-a-thon again, but this time more clearly focusing the theme on female artists and practitioners of colour, using *Recordings* as our key text. This aligned the theme closely to the collection priorities of the host library while connecting the edit-a-thon to a priority which goes beyond institutional boundaries: decolonization.

22. Siân Evans. "Art + Feminism: an interview with Siân Evans." Interview by Gustavo Grandal Montero. *Art Libraries Journal* 44, no. 2 (2019): 72–77, 74.

Wikipedia: a tool for activism

Involving myself in the mechanics of the editing process, I noticed several things. Wikipedia has its downsides, so librarians should proceed with caution; but there are many good things about it, certainly the skills which are required for editing. The necessity of edits being backed up by *appropriate* secondary sources forces any editor to not only find sources, but read and evaluate them to understand the mechanics of both writing and referencing. In short, these are learning outcomes librarians usually try to cover under the guise of information literacy. In evaluating the skills you learn from editing Wikipedia, it is impossible to miss how

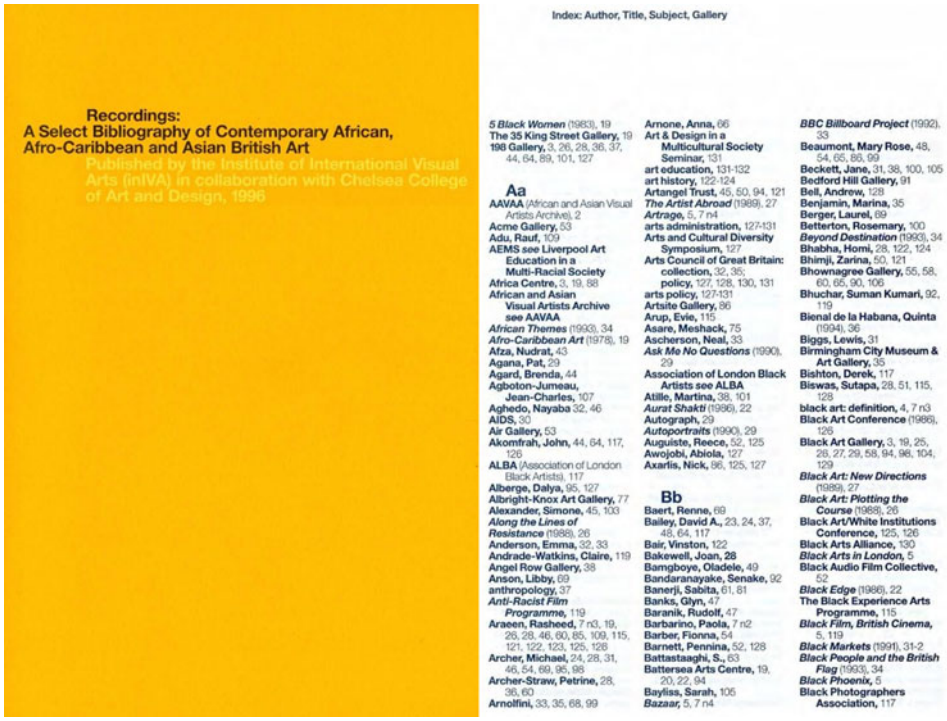


Fig. 2. *Recordings: A Select Bibliography of Contemporary African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian British Art* (cover). Image courtesy of Chelsea College of Arts Library, University of the Arts London.

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closely they map to information literacy learning outcomes, and there are already many examples of successfully embedded Wikipedia projects across multiple subject disciplines (STEM subjects, humanities and journalism, in particular). But as our attendee Cat identified - the thing that drew most people was activism. From participating in the scholarly conversation, they learn that they have a voice and it's valid, they start to question the very notion of authority, and can use their voice for positive change. Part of critical librarianship is being frank with students about the problems inherent in Western publishing, and the need for marginalized voices to be represented. As Cat said, '…finding your own voice in the conversation is empowering.'

In art librarianship we have many opportunities to engage with physical collections that challenge the dominant Western publishing model. In a similar vein, open access products like Wikipedia can be used to explore what representation means in our collections, libraries and societies. Activism can be a good way to covertly instruct students in information literacy, but – given the issues around open access products reflecting the inequality of the wider society – we need to take on the role of activists ourselves, and use the platforms we have to encourage our library users to do the same.

Ruminating on both the benefits of editing for students, and the bigger issues at play related to colonial legacies in the wider information landscape, I, and a colleague from Academic Support, Adam Ramejkis, decided to facilitate a workshop in December 2019. The idea being that it would acknowledge and unpack the issues with Wikipedia in relation to colonialism, society, collections, research, publishing, bias etc., and confront them head on with a digital intervention. It would be framed as an explicitly activist event. The aim was to consider the cultures and politics of open source publishing and Wikipedia, and the possibilities for activism within these domains, asking questions like "Does its open source nature mean it is unreliable or does it merely conform to a different, more collaborative, system of checks and controls?" and, "Can it be used for research as well as a tool for change"?

We started by facilitating a discussion on Wikipedia – asking why it is good and why it is problematic – with the students adding their contributions to a mindmap. Without our assistance they raised some of the key points noting that it is open source and accessible (good), that anyone can edit (which is a double edged sword), and that it reflects a lack of diversity, in particular citing the low number of female editors and the factor of English being the dominant language (bad), which results in the West acting as gatekeeper for other knowledges. We went on to do editing focused on updating a pre-prepared and focused list of stub entries on under-represented artists, again using *Recordings*. We noted with interest that the students already understood how open source products sometimes fail, as well as knowing that they want to use them for better purposes. Keen to continue with this practical activism, most attendees left asking when we would be hosting the next one.

The main takeaway was the realization that there are not enough secondary sources about under-represented subjects or people. Wikipedia is a useful tool to highlight this; it cannot answer on behalf of publishing's or society's failings but acts as a mirror that reflects and prominently displays its shortcomings. *Recordings* usefully bypasses the issue: as a published index it can serve not only as a wayfinding device to identify under-represented subjects, but as a repository of information on said subjects. So, as acknowledged, open source products like Wikipedia tend to be a reflection of the bias already inherent in society, but this realization creates another opportunity to effect change.

What next?

Students are aware. Initiatives like Liberate my Curriculum - a UK movement that promotes reading list and curriculum audits to ensure inclusion of more women and Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) artists, theorists, and lecturers - shine a spotlight on institutions, libraries and their collections, and indeed our position in the narratives of inequality in which we find ourselves. They want to know what we're doing to address this imbalance in order to create truly inclusive spaces. There are already some notable projects taking place at UAL, and many other higher education (HE) institutions, but going forward I plan to continue hosting edit-a-thons and hack-a-thons, and do these things in partnership with the other initiatives and organizations that function within and alongside UAL.

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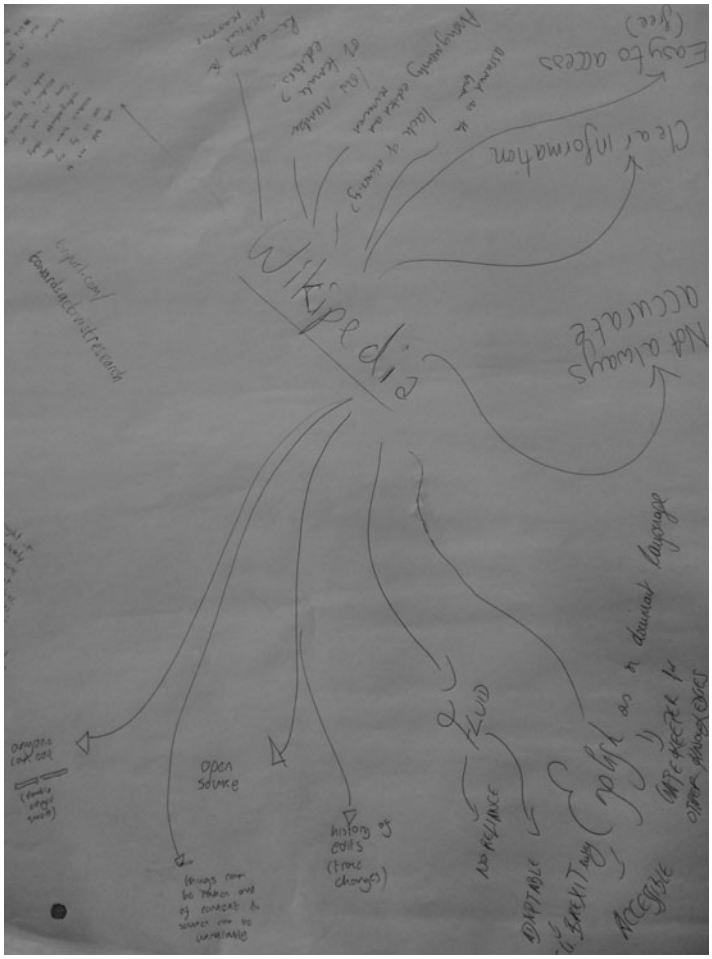


Fig. 3. 'Wikipedia mindmap' participant responses from UAL student workshop, 6 December 2019. Image courtesy of Alexandra Duncan.

With the newly-formed UAL Decolonising Arts Institute, for example, there will be many opportunities for collaboration. There is also real scope for running Wikipedia projects with Iniva, whose collections complement Chelsea's, and Shades of Noir (an independent organization within the university that runs events focused on challenging race inequality and oppression within the HE sector). Both organizations already have wide-ranging networks which may enable us to work more easily with external local communities as well as our own internal HE community.

More work could be done on creating connections between articles; one of the basic issues with information on under-represented subjects on Wikipedia is the lack of links. First you can create or improve individual articles, but you must look at how they are being signposted. Connectivity is a key tenet of the creative student's skillset, so earmarking this as a longer-term goal within institutional Wikipedia projects would be an opportunity. There would also be huge benefit to looking at the work needed to be done on article translation - a possible focus in relation to local outreach projects, among others.

There is real value to embedding Wikipedia into HE curriculums, partly because of all the hard skills in information and digital literacy it teaches students, but also in terms of critical thinking, inclusivity and empowerment. There is movement on this at UAL already, with senior academic managers noticing what we've already done, acknowledging the need for both the mechanical skills it brings and opportunities to address the current lack of inclusivity, and discussing how it could be formalized going forward. At the time of writing – I, along with academic colleagues from the London College of Communication (LCC), and a Wikimedian are about to launch a series of (now remote) Wikipedia workshops, for staff and student participants to work collaboratively on improving existing Wikipedia pages of under-represented creative practitioners as a means of increasing their visibility and credibility.

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What must be considered, is whether embedded HE projects should primarily focus on compliance with Wikipedia criteria, with learning outcomes related to hard skills won from editing, or whether they should be framed as an interventionist exercise? Merely following the system as it is currently laid out can hardly be understood as decolonization - at best we are left with neo-colonialism in digital form. Should we instead be focusing on opportunities to challenge current notions of authority, notability, and consensus? As Thomas Haslam notes, the best way to teach students about the limits and vulnerability of Wikipedia is to have them create and edit articles in accordance with the Wikipedia criteria.[23] Part of challenging the current system is also a willingness to take responsibility for changing it for the better:

> If it is not in Encyclopedia Britannica, blame the editors, if it is not in Wikipedia blame yourself. . . If you see a Wikipedia article in your area of expertise which lacks good writing, accurate and up-to-date information, and credible scholarly sources, you know who to hold responsible.[24]

The next logical step: if you can't find the sources, then write them. The big issue exposed by working with students is that not enough secondary sources are being published on under-represented people, so we need to change that. You need secondary sources for editing Wikipedia; without them we can't use it in the way we need to, and it can't reflect the true breadth and depth of our global society. When it comes to digital inclusion, we need to accept Wikipedia as both the problem and the solution, move beyond the model of the passive information consumer to accept our responsibility as active editors and creators, and overthrow the current model of Western publishing. Ultimately, we must recognize that 'Wikipedia isn't just an encyclopedia, it's a community.'[25]

23. Thomas Haslam. "Wikipedia and the Humanities in Higher Education: Past Time to Re-negotiate the Relationship" *International Journal of Information and Education Technology* 7, no. 4 (2017): 246–251, 250.

24. Haslam, "Wikipedia," 250.

25. Evans, "Art + Feminism," 52.

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