

Women on Wikipedia: Theory and Praxis

By Aruna Balasubramanian and Autumn Hall

Abstract

By May 2024, Wikipedia claimed the distinction of being the largest encyclopedia in world history, and the seventh most-visited website in the world. It has existed in 329 different language versions, with English being the most extensive.¹ Free and open to the public, the platform functions as a major educational resource for people of diverse backgrounds and interests. Wikipedia is also extraordinarily collaborative, reliant on a vast international network of volunteer editors who contribute content to the site and vet its quality and accuracy. While this publication system encourages broad participation, it also leads to something called the “mirror effect:” the process whereby online content becomes imbued with the prejudices of individuals who project their own social biases into the digital platform. The mirror effect helps to explain why Wikipedia has reflected a considerable gender bias in the underrepresentation of women in biographies and other articles: the majority of volunteer editors have identified as men, and the content has reflected this fact. By September 2023 only 385,236 of 1,960,452 biographical articles on English-language Wikipedia—about 20%—covered female-identifying individuals.² In this article, which we write from our perspective as college students who are relatively new Wikipedia contributors, we discuss this gender gap and current efforts to fill it. Specifically, we walk through Wikipedia’s publication process by examining two women’s biographies that we wrote ourselves as case studies. Connecting theory and praxis, we present writing for Wikipedia as a form of social justice and equity-building activism that college students and other members of the public can feasibly pursue.

Keywords: Wikipedia, women’s history, public history, female representation, gender gap, theory and praxis, equity

¹ Zachary McDowell and Matthew Vetter, "Wikipedia: Representation and Reality," in *Language Learning Strategies and Individual Learner Characteristics*, Taylor & Francis, <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.utk.idm.oclc.org/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9781003094081/wikipedia-representation-reality-zachary-mcdowell-matthew-vetter>.

² Wikipedia, “Gender Bias on Wikipedia.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_bias_on_Wikipedia#:~:text=Of%20the%201%2C960%2C452%20biographical%20articles.than%20existing%20articles%20of%20men

Theory: Understanding Wikipedia

What is Wikipedia and Why it Matters

Wikipedia is an exhaustive world encyclopedia project hosted by the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation. It is both the “largest and most widely used encyclopedia in history,”³ and it continues to grow and evolve with an average of two edits being made every second and 538 new articles being published per day in 2024.⁴ In a February 2024 report published by the online internet data collection resource SEMrush, Wikipedia was listed as the 6th most searched website globally and 7th in the United States.⁵ Because of how great the scale of Wikipedia has become, it can be regarded as one of the most ambitious intellectual projects of the 21st century, much as Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Encyclopédie* was intended to be the most ambitious Enlightenment project of their time.

Wikipedia serves the same purpose as many encyclopedias: to provide exhaustive background knowledge to curious readers. However, Wikipedia is unique in that it allows individuals to continuously make edits to the website, in order to ensure that the most up-to-date information is available to all at any time. With this aim in mind, the Wikimedia Foundation has declared its support of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4,⁶ to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”⁷ As a part of this ongoing effort, Wikipedia is seeking to prioritize and promote knowledge equity through its website, updates, and programs. Wikipedia’s reach and accessibility to the general public drives its potential to be an educational resource for individuals of diverse learning backgrounds, preferences, and capabilities.

Wikipedia is widely used by the general public, amassing more than 84 billion page views in 2023.⁸ To defend the precision of the information it disseminates, the platform places on editors seeking publication a “heavy emphasis on reliable sources,” which is required for articles to pass through its rigorous online editorial process.⁹

How Wikipedia Works

³ Zachary McDowell and Matthew Vetter, "Wikipedia: Representation and Reality," in *Language Learning Strategies and Individual Learner Characteristics*, Taylor & Francis, <https://www.taylorfrancis-com.utk.idm.oclc.org/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9781003094081/wikipedia-representation-reality-zachary-mcdowell-matthew-vetter>.

⁴ Wikipedia, "Wikipedia:Statistics." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Statistics>.

⁵ SEMrush, "SEMrush - Wikipedia.org Overview." <https://www.semrush.com/website/wikipedia.org/overview/>.

⁶ United Nations, "Goal 4: Quality Education." Sustainable Development Goals. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>.

⁷ Wikimedia Foundation, "Promoting Knowledge Equity." <https://wikimediafoundation.org/our-work/education/promoting-knowledge-equity/>.

⁸ Sergio Padilla, "Wikipedia releases its top 25 most-viewed pages of 2023." *CNN*, December 6, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/tech/wikipedia-chatgpt-oppenheimer-indian-entertainment/index.html>.

⁹ Dariusz Jemielniak, "Wikipedia: Why is the common knowledge resource still neglected by academics?" *GigaScience* 8, no. 12 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1093/gigascience/giz139>.

Jimmy “Jimbo” Wales and Larry Sanger founded Wikipedia in January 2001 in an effort to democratize information on a revolutionary scale. Their online encyclopedia would rely on the contributions of lay anonymous writers and editors, called “Wikipedians,” to build community knowledge across a variety of different subjects. Wales and Sanger created an easy-to-use infrastructure that anyone could learn to operate by consulting Wikipedia’s simple how-to pages.¹⁰

However, Wikipedia does not permit writers to insert just any article into the system. The text must fit a set of community guidelines in order for it to get and to stay published. For example, by allowing multiple people to edit a new page; by linking other Wikipedia pages to ideas, people, or places mentioned in a new article; and by inserting index categories at the bottom of a text, writers can add credibility to their contribution, making it look deserving of a spot in the encyclopedia. But if their article does not appear to adhere to community standards—according to the somewhat subjective opinions of other Wikipedia editors—Wikipedians can reverse the publication of a piece.

When a source is published, idle Wikipedians typically moderate them within seconds or minutes. Reviewers who notice the new page announcement can approve the article to stay public, reject it while requesting further edits, or mark it for direct deletion. These moderators are often judgmental of new pages. Aggressive reviewers can target articles which oppose their politics, fall outside of their preconceived beliefs, or pique their prejudice. Many times, moderators justify pages for deletion by marking them as badly sourced or otherwise poorly constructed, according to Wikipedia’s guidelines.¹¹ This is especially a risk for articles relating to minorities, who are often less amply represented in historical documentation and the open-access web than white men, and whose pages are often therefore marked as under-sourced or similarly deficient. This is how the “policies and guidelines that protect the integrity” of Wikipedia’s information and make it “one of the most trusted sources for information on the internet” has also “impeded the diversity” of its content.¹²

A great example of moderator bias is that which Dr. Alana Cattapan, Professor of Political Science at the University of Waterloo, wrote about in 2012. When she uploaded her student’s new Wikipedia entry about Vancouver’s 1969 Abortion Caravan, she received a message saying that it was tagged for immediate deletion within seconds of publishing. Cattapan expressed that “[g]iven the minutiae on the lives of celebrities and television shows that stand uncontested on the site, it felt like an ideological attack.”¹³

¹⁰ Christine Meyer, “If You Want to Change the World, Edit Wikipedia’: Mitigating the Gender Gap and Systemic Bias on Wikipedia,” (master’s thesis, University of Idaho, 2022), 24-44.

¹¹ Wikipedia, “Wikipedia:Reliable sources,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable_sources.

¹² Christine Meyer, “If You Want to Change the World, Edit Wikipedia’: Mitigating the Gender Gap and Systemic Bias on Wikipedia,” (master’s thesis, University of Idaho, 2022), 4.

¹³ Alana Cattapan, “(Re)Writing ‘Feminism in Canada’: Wikipedia in the Feminist Classroom,” *Feminist Teacher* 22, no. 2 (2012): 133, <https://doi.org/10.5406/femteacher.22.2.0125>.

When moderators mark pages for deletion or rejection, they sometimes engage in heated exchanges with writers called “edit wars,”¹⁴ where the writer and the reviewer go back-and-forth undoing each other’s edits and arguing on “talk pages”—chat forums tied to specific articles—in an effort to justify an article’s rightful place on (or off) Wikipedia. Editors can also solicit the input of other Wikipedians to weigh in on the conversation. When no side of the debate prevails, Wikipedians can vote on an article’s status definitively. In 2019, French-language Wikipedian Natacha Rault shared an experience she had with edit war: She spent six months arguing with another editor about whether U.K. politician Theresa May should be labeled with the feminine conjugation of Prime Minister (*première ministre*) or the masculine (*premier ministre*).

However, some moderators police content on Wikipedia in other ways, without deleting or rejecting new pages: they can “class” an article in accordance with its quality of writing, importance, and sourcing. For example, reviewers can mark an article as “C-Class,” meaning that it contains irrelevant material and is not substantial enough. These qualifications are intended to attract the attention of other Wikipedians who can hopefully add to the article. But while intended to support new publications, the classing of Wikipedia texts can seem to denigrate and pass subjective value judgment on the content of new pages.¹⁵

Some individuals use Wikipedia to harass and alienate female and LGBTQ+ contributors. In fact, a 2015 study by Amanda Menking and Ingrid Erickson showed that many women did not feel comfortable using Wikipedia since it took “taxing emotional labor” for them to contribute to the site while managing the attacks of other Wikipedians.¹⁶ Cattapan referred to this as the “anti-female culture” that exists especially “among Wikipedia’s longtime and more established editors”—male Wikipedians who are more “credible” along community guidelines due to their large number and long-term span of edits.¹⁷

In 2019, *The New York Times* described Wikipedia as “a kind of social network where users debate the minutiae of history and modern life,” and referenced the case of a transgender man named Pax Ahimsa Gethen (they/them), who was persistently harassed by another editor. They were told to kill themselves, that they were unloved, and that they belonged in an internment camp. The harasser also posted Mx. Gethen’s deadname.

Due to its policies, structure, and community guidelines, Wikipedia is at once a comparably reliable and community-built encyclopedia, as well as a social space that fosters

¹⁴ Julia Jacobs, “Wikipedia Isn’t Officially a Social Network. But the Harassment Can Get Ugly,” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Apr. 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/08/us/wikipedia-harassment-wikimedia-foundation.html>.

¹⁵ Wikipedia, “Wikipedia: Content Assessment,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Content_assessment.

¹⁶ Amanda Menking and Ingrid Erickson, “The Heart Work of Wikipedia: Gendered, Emotional Labor in the World’s Largest Online Encyclopedia,” *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, (2015): 209, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2702123.2702514>.

¹⁷ Alana Cattapan, “(Re)Writing ‘Feminism in Canada’: Wikipedia in the Feminist Classroom,” *Feminist Teacher* 22, no. 2 (2012): 128, <https://doi.org/10.5406/femteacher.22.2.0125>.

prejudice and censorship: a contradictory duality. And for this reason, Wikipedia can powerfully influence the real world. Not only can harassment affect the day-to-day lives of female and LGBTQ+ writers, but the site's information and social interactions can travel far and wide with consequences. For instance, a Wikipedian once joked in an article that a prize for the 1987 women's European football cup was an ironing board. The quip was swiftly deleted but media outlets echoed it until, in 2007, the German president Horst Köhler referenced the fictive ironing board while awarding a women's national team.¹⁸

The Mirror Effect

Wikipedia does not just affect the real world; Wikipedia *is the real world* in many ways. In fact, every bias and falsity present in the seemingly infinite expanse of the online encyclopedia was inserted there by a human user. Wikipedia's content is therefore imbued with the prejudices of Wikipedians, who project the real-world social problems surrounding them into the digital platform. Wikipedia thus acts as a mirror, reflecting our societies' contemporary flaws.¹⁹

Indeed, English-language Wikipedia mirrors the systemic inequalities of the English-speaking world. Its content routinely privileges the narratives of white people in the Global North and often presents colonial viewpoints, much like the standard historical narratives that are taught in public schools and disseminated by powerful educational and political institutions in the West.²⁰

Not only does Wikipedia's written content recall the inequalities of Western societies; its photos do the same. For example, as Ian Ramjohn points out, the images on Wikipedia articles are often out-of-date "because their copyrights have expired" and they are thus public domain. Their old age reinforces Westerners' "existing perceptions" of "unfamiliar landscapes," and can fuel biases about the so-called "backwardness" of developing countries, which have modernized and changed exponentially in recent decades. These places often look far different today from their portrayal on Wikipedia. However, Ramjohn is optimistic that annual photography contests like Wiki Loves Africa can help to expand appropriate representations of the developing world. On the other hand, the competitions have downsides: "because they are contests, they favor the inclusion of (...) exoticizing imagery."²¹

In short, Wikipedia's mirror effect is a problem for two reasons. Firstly, it can help to perpetuate and reinforce insensitive historical narratives, misconstruing current realities and the

¹⁸ René König, "WIKIPEDIA: Between Lay Participation and Elite Knowledge Representation," *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 2 (2013): 162, doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.734319.

¹⁹ Núria Ferran-Ferrer, Juan-José Boté-Vericad; Julià Minguillón, "Wikipedia Gender Gap: a Scoping Review," *Profesional de la Información* 32, no. 6 (2023): 8, <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2023.nov.17>.

²⁰ Ian Ramjohn, *Using Open Educational Resources to Promote Social Justice* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022), 251-252, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Decolonizing_Wikipedia.pdf.

²¹ Ian Ramjohn, *Using Open Educational Resources to Promote Social Justice*, 254, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Decolonizing_Wikipedia.pdf.

past. Secondly, it can contribute to the exclusion of minorities' voices and the developing world from international historical and contemporary memory. Ultimately, the mirror effect threatens Wikipedia's encyclopedic accuracy and neutrality, as well as its aim to foster knowledge equity.

Wikipedia Activism

In the past decade, as Wikipedia's importance and its systemic issues have become more publicly visible, community- and classroom-based movements to decolonize Wikipedia's historical narratives, fill in its logical gaps, and increase its representation of minorities and women have catalyzed. Individuals across the planet have been delving into Wikipedia writing as a form of social activism. For instance, Wikithons—sometimes themed according to identity group or discipline—have increased in popularity. These events gather new and experienced Wikipedians to create new content or add to sparse pages on the platform.²² Additionally, university professors have begun assigning Wikipedia-writing to students as a form of public-knowledge dissemination.²³ The Wikipedia Student Program—as the Wiki Education Foundation calls the teaching initiative—also simultaneously empowers students to use their writer's voice in the real world...of Wikipedia.²⁴

An example of a recent community push to expand content on Wikipedia is the Women in Red project. It is “one of the largest and most active projects on Wikipedia,” aiming to “‘turn ‘redlinks’ into blue ones,’” or, in other words, to turn empty pages into substantive articles. Since January 2022, Women in Red has created almost 178,000 new biographies about women. It also maintains an [extensive list of notable female figures](#) classified by period, profession, and place whose pages have not yet been written, encouraging anyone interested to write about these individuals.

Perhaps we could see equity movements like Women in Red as online versions or sibling projects of movements in the real world. Maybe recent activist efforts like Anti-Asian Hate and Black Lives Matter have projected increased social justice activism into Wikipedia, which could potentially be a positive result of the mirror effect. And if that is the case—if it is indeed true that Wikipedia mirrors both the systemic inequalities and the activism of contemporary Western society, then perhaps Wikipedia is just another complex political and social space that we occupy as human beings in the digital twenty-first century. In our era of LED screens and button-clicking, maybe existing alongside Wikipedia is part of the experience of living in the digitized world as a whole.

Wikipedia and Women's Coverage

Women are largely underrepresented among Wikipedia contributors. In 2018, English-speaking editors self-reported a gender identity breakdown of 1.7% non-binary, 13.6%

²² Christine Meyer, “‘If You Want to Change the World, Edit Wikipedia’: Mitigating the Gender Gap and Systemic Bias on Wikipedia,” (master's thesis, University of Idaho, 2022), 14-23.

²³ Alana Cattapan, “(Re)Writing ‘Feminism in Canada’: Wikipedia in the Feminist Classroom,” *Feminist Teacher* 22, no. 2 (2012): 125-136, <https://doi.org/10.5406/femteacher.22.2.0125>.

²⁴ Wiki Education Foundation, “Teach With Wikipedia.” <https://wikiedu.org/teach-with-wikipedia/>.

female and 74.7% male.²⁵ The estimated percentage of female editors was slightly larger, ranging from 15-20%.²⁶ In a 2011 study, Judd Antin et al. found that “among the bottom three quartiles of [active] Wikipedians (...) men and women made similar numbers of revisions in nearly every category of Wikiwork.”²⁷ However, among the top 25% of Wikipedia contributors, “just 27% of revisions were completed by women,” and among the bottom 75% of contributing Wikipedians, “women appeared to make larger revisions in many categories.”²⁸ Despite the fact that women made a similar number of revisions as their male counterparts in the bottom three quarters of Wikipedians, the gap in gender representation in Wikipedia’s content lies largely in the poor representation of women in the top quartile, where “the most active Wikipedians are also those who largely set policies, arbitrate disputes, and do other high-level tasks into which biases of worldview and temperament can subtly creep.”²⁹ This unequal representation of women in the upper quartiles of Wikipedia editors, if unchanged, has the potential to cause further gender biases, both intentional and unintentional. Thus, Wikipedia acts as an infrastructure with specific power and status demands that lead to resistance against women. Heather Ford and Judy Wajcman further this idea in their explanation of Wikipedia’s infrastructure model:

The infrastructure lens we have adopted here shines a light on the less visible sources of gender inequality. It reveals how the very identity of a Wikipedian, its habitus, still reflects the history of technoscience as an almost exclusively male province. Unless Wikipedia radically changes its own culture of knowledge production, women will remain on the edges; our knowledge will once again be marginalized.³⁰

This inherent inequality in the very structure of Wikipedia is working against the efforts that members of the Wikipedia community are currently making to combat the gender gap.

Furthermore, the issue of skewed representation between male-identifying and female-identifying individuals is not only present among Wikipedia’s contributing and editing members; it is also present in the inaccurate depictions of women in articles, and in the absence of biographies featuring influential women. As of September 2023, only 385,236 of 1,960,452

²⁵ Dominican University, “Wikipedia: Editing and Contributing.” <https://research.dom.edu/wiki/whyedit#:~:text=In%20a%202018%20survey%20covering,female%20and%201.7%25%20as%20other>.

²⁶ Oliver Balch, “Making the edit: why we need more women in Wikipedia.” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/careers/2019/nov/28/making-the-edit-why-we-need-more-women-in-wikipedia>

²⁷ Judd Antin, et al., “Gender differences in Wikipedia editing.” <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2038558.2038561>

²⁸ Judd Antin, et al., “Gender differences in Wikipedia editing.” <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2038558.2038561>

²⁹ Judd Antin et al., “Gender differences in Wikipedia editing.” <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2038558.2038561>

³⁰ Heather Ford and Judy Wajcman, “Anyone can edit’, not everyone does: Wikipedia and the gender gap.” *Social Studies of Science*, 2017. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68675/1/Wajcman_Anyone%20can%20edit_Final_2017.pdf

biographical articles on the English Wikipedia are about female-identifying individuals.³¹ This number equates to less than 20% of Wikipedia articles. And as Tripodi et al. express, women's biographies that meet Wikipedia's standards for publication are also more often considered non-notable compared to men's pages. For this reason, biographies of women are more often nominated for deletion.³²

There have been prominent examples of this double standard in previous years. For example, Wikipedians were unable to successfully publish a biography about Donna Strickland, the third female Nobel Prize winner in physics, until after her award was announced.³³ Strickland had a Wikipedia biography prior to receiving the honor, but her page was nominated for and then successfully deleted because editors labeled her as a non-notable individual, despite the fact that she had already carved out a distinguished career in the sciences at the time. Her case is part of a much larger issue, as contributors note concerns about preserving articles after they have already been published on the Wikipedia website.³⁴

Additionally, women's biographies are often of lesser quality and information than those of men. For instance, In 2007, Maya Angelou's Wikipedia biography was sparse, despite her fame as a memoirist, poet, and civil rights activist. Additionally, the Wikipedia page focusing on her autobiography "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" lacked relevant photos and a discussion of the literary significance of the book. Rather, it included a simple, short summary of the text with little to no connection to Angelou as a writer. Christine Meyer, who was largely responsible for the development of Angelou's Wikipedia page, explains this phenomenon of women's articles lacking substance. She states, "[t]his trend is not new or relegated to Wikipedia but is part of the centuries-long and large-scale tendency to 'write women out of history,' not only in printed encyclopedias, but in historiographic and hagiographic contexts"³⁵

Praxis & the Importance of Action

Meyer's experience inspired her adage, "If you want to change the world, edit Wikipedia," which aims to target the existing gender biases through direct involvement with the platform.³⁶ Discussing Wikipedia's role in the representation of marginalized people is important, but it is even more crucial to follow up on these conversations with tangible contributions.

³¹ Wikipedia, "Gender Bias on Wikipedia."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_bias_on_Wikipedia#:~:text=Of%20the%201%2C960%2C452%20biographical%20articles.than%20existing%20articles%20of%20men

³² Francesca Tripodi et al., "Ms. Categorized: Gender, Notability, and Inequality on Wikipedia," *New Media & Society* 25, no. 7 (2023): 1687-1707, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211023772>.

³³ Francesca Tripodi, "Ms. Categorized: Gender, notability, and inequality on Wikipedia." <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14614448211023772>

³⁴ Manjula Selvarajah, "Canadian Nobel scientist's deletion from Wikipedia points to wider bias, study finds." *CBC News*, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/wikipedia-bias-1.6129073>

³⁵ Christine Meyer, "If You Want to Change the World, Edit Wikipedia': Mitigating the Gender Gap and Systemic Bias on Wikipedia," (master's thesis, University of Idaho, 2022),.

³⁶ Christine Meyer, "If You Want to Change the World, Edit Wikipedia': Mitigating the Gender Gap and Systemic Bias on Wikipedia," (master's thesis, University of Idaho, 2022),.

Right now, as community efforts like edit-a-thons and women's history initiatives abound, Wikipedians are approaching the expansion of women's representation on Wikipedia comparably to how U.S. Second Wave feminists approached women's representation in science during the Cold War period. Or as Ford and Wajcman articulate, the "liberal feminist tradition" of the Second Wave "located the problem" of women's representation in their own "aspirations and values, rather than asking broader questions about whether STEM disciplines and institutions could be reshaped to accommodate women."³⁷ Wikipedian feminists are doing something similar by seeking to insert women's own representation into Wikipedia, even if they cannot change the biased structure of Wikipedia's editing and publication process itself.

Going forward ideally, feminists will be held increasingly less responsible for adding women's narratives on the platform. Anyone and everyone should be writing about women, in an effort to compile an accurate and holistic history of the world, particularly because in a perfect encyclopedia, everyone's voices would be present, including female ones.

For this reason, in this article we seek to do the same. By applying Wikipedia-related social theories to real article-editing, we merge theory and praxis. The intertwining of knowledge and action is crucial to pushing forth equal representation in the world of Wikipedia.

While the makings of this article did involve a large amount of traditional academic research, we found much of our information in personal trial and error. In the following section, we reflect upon two of our experiences writing pages for notable yet unrepresented women and getting them published on Wikipedia. We use these case studies to illustrate the aforementioned issues regarding female representation on the platform. Our examples speak to the fact that anyone has the capability to make a difference in narrowing the gender gap in digital humanities spaces.

Experiments and Results: Our Contributions and Their Significance

Delia Garlic by Autumn Hall

Delia Garlic (c. 1837-?) was a formerly enslaved woman originally from Virginia. Garlic is best known for her first-hand account of enslavement, the Civil War, and post-emancipation freedom. In 1937 when she was one hundred years old, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) of The Works Project Administration recorded her oral history in Montgomery, Alabama. Her account is still considered to be "one of the most critical recorded during the FWP project."³⁸

I first discovered Delia Garlic when I noticed her name mentioned in the Library of Congress collection entitled "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938." This collection consists of "more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and

³⁷ Heather Ford and Judy Wajcman, "'Anyone can edit', not everyone does: Wikipedia and the gender gap." *Social Studies of Science*, 2017.

https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68675/1/Wajcman_Anyone%20can%20edit_Final_2017.pdf

³⁸ Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade, "Delia Garlic."

<https://enslaved.org/fullStory/16-23-92878/> .

500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves”³⁹ Upon reading a transcription of Garlic’s account, I became interested in her story and decided to pursue further research.

Although there is a full oral testimony of Garlic’s life as an enslaved woman, there are very few secondary biographies available about her online, and even fewer of these biographies tell the full story of Garlic’s life before and after enslavement. The FWP featured several thousand accounts of enslavement, but Garlic’s individual tale stands out for her scathing descriptions of life as an enslaved woman in comparison to her post-enslavement life, which took place in the midst of the Great Depression.

Writing Garlic’s article felt like a large undertaking to me, as I just made my first Wikipedia account only days prior. Of course, I had casually surfed Wikipedia before, mainly as preliminary research for other projects, but I had never really seen the publishing and editing processes that take place behind the scenes. I also realized that I would have to piece together Garlic’s life from a variety of partial narratives available publicly online. Using a select number of biographies written about her, and the most fully formed retelling of her life on Enslaved.org,⁴⁰ I was able to piece together an account of her life.

My initial draft of Delia Garlic’s page started with primary sources from the FWP collection featured in the Library of Congress, including a single photo of Garlic and the transcription of her story, along with the secondary source biography on enslaved.org.⁴¹ After reviewing primary sources, I started to look more closely at secondary sources that talked largely about Garlic’s context in the world of Black feminist movements, more contemporary understandings of historical slave narratives, and general studies of the effects of the Great Depression. Some of the most notable sources that I reviewed in my secondary source research include Stephanie Shaw’s “Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression” in *The Journal of Southern History*, Karen Cook Bell’s nonfiction collection *Claiming Freedom: Race, Kinship, and Land in Nineteenth-Century Georgia*, and Deidre Cooper Owens’ “Black Women’s Experiences in Slavery and Medicine” in *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*. While none of these sources focus solely on Garlic, they all provide helpful context into her life and general context in relevant historical movements. These writings are all essential pieces in understanding her connection to our modern knowledge of enslavement and connecting contemporary Black women’s issues to generational struggles.

Garlic’s story is unique because she told it on record and in her own words. For many women of the past, this is not the case. For generations, history has been dictated largely by men, and this is especially true when considering how many women have had their entire life stories told by their male counterparts. For this reason, it is not only important to preserve stories about

³⁹ Library of Congress, “About the Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936 to 1938.” <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>.

⁴⁰ Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade, “Delia Garlic.” <https://enslaved.org/fullStory/16-23-92878/>.

⁴¹ Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade. “Delia Garlic.” Enslaved.org. <https://enslaved.org/fullStory/16-23-92878/>.

women who did not get to write their own narratives, but it is also important to highlight the stories told about women by women.

Helen Eliza Benson Garrison by Aruna Balasubramanian

Helen Eliza Benson Garrison (February 23, 1811-January 25, 1876) was an American abolitionist as well as a fundraiser and advocate for the American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS), who made her home into a salon for radical thinkers, activists, and artists. She did not have a Wikipedia page, but her husband William Lloyd Garrison, who founded the AAS and the anti-slavery publication *The Liberator*, had an extensive one.

I discovered Helen Garrison when I stumbled upon the 398 letters addressed to her by her husband William, which were digitized and made publicly available by the The Black Women's Suffrage Digital Collection.⁴² Using material drawn from the letters, a handful of extant sources, and William's postmortem biography of Helen, I concocted her Wikipedia page from scratch. Fortunately, perhaps thanks to Helen's status as William's husband, her contributions to recognized organizations like the AAS and her demonstrable connections to famous figures with Wikipedia pages like Wendell Phillips and Lucy Stone, my article's publication was quickly approved by a supportive reviewer. Additionally, I already had a history of Wikipedia page creation and editing which may have increased my article's status. I also extensively interlinked Helen's page with other published—and therefore certified “credible”—articles, and added subject categories to the bottom of the page including “1811 births,” “Abolitionists from Rhode Island,” and “Salon-holders.” These contextualize Helen's importance in American and world history.⁴³

Helen Garrison's case can demonstrate how women's representation in digitized and open-access documentary history, and therefore also on Wikipedia, is often dependent on and formulated by association to the men in their lives.⁴⁴ Indeed, I only discovered Helen through William, and until I wrote her article she largely existed on the Internet in passing mentions as the wife of a great abolitionist man.

But no matter how much my article focuses on Helen's person and accomplishments, the major source of my information is still the biography written by her husband, *Helen Eliza Garrison: A Memorial*. The book is the most extensive work of writing about Helen's life, and contextualizes her existence in William's, portraying her role as being primarily that of a supportive wife and mother. Nevertheless, relevant professional and biographical data does exist in William's text, although it leaves out some important details. For instance, he occasionally

⁴² Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, via The Black Women's Suffrage Digital Collection, <https://blackwomenssuffrage.dp.la/search?subject=%22Abolitionists--United%20States--History--19th%20century%22%7C%22Garrison%2C%20Helen%20Eliza%201811-1876%22&page=1>.

⁴³ Wikipedia, “Helen Eliza Benson Garrison,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Eliza_Benson_Garrison.

⁴⁴ Ian Ramjohn, *Using Open Educational Resources to Promote Social Justice*, 249, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Decolonizing_Wikipedia.pdf.

ignores dates and the names of specific funds that Helen worked for. He also fails to elaborate on what Helen's position entailed when she managed the Boston Anti-Slavery Bazaar.

Overall, writing Helen Garrison's page was an exercise in countering the negative potential of the mirror effect. While the Internet seemed to remember Helen as the supportive partner of William Garrison, I did not want her Wikipedia page to portray her in the same reductive light. Rather, while acknowledging Helen's family roles, I constructed her article to convey her personal contributions to the abolition movement and her unique position in the American past. Now, my Wikipedia page is the top hit on Google when you search up her name. Hopefully, it will project a fairer depiction of Helen's legacy into our collective English-language historical memory, using the mirror effect to its advantage.

The Mirror Effect in the Publishing Process: Rejection and Appraisal

From the beginning to end of publishing our articles, we noticed moderators' biases against the women about whom we wrote. These instances were examples of how the prejudices of Wikipedia moderators reflect into the digital world.

To start, Delia Garlic's page was originally declined for publication. A moderator labeled it as insufficiently reliably sourced, although there were five credible sources based in Garlic's extensive oral testimony. We did not initially cite more secondary sources because we assumed we would be able to add more content in formal edits once the page was technically "up." We were surprised by the initial rejection, but we were grateful that Garlic's biography was at least not marked for immediate deletion. We proceeded to add a dozen secondary source references to her page, we petitioned again for publication, and we succeeded with relief.

Submission declined on 21 March 2024 by [Utopes](#) (talk).

This submission is not adequately supported by [reliable sources](#). *Reliable* sources are required so that information can be [verified](#). If you need help with referencing, please see [Referencing for beginners](#) and [Citing sources](#).

- If you would like to continue working on the submission, click on the "Edit" tab at the top of the window.
- If you have not resolved the issues listed above, your draft will be declined again and potentially deleted.
- If you need extra help, please [ask us a question](#) at the AfC Help Desk or get [live help](#) from experienced editors.
- Please do not remove reviewer comments or this notice until the submission is accepted.

Where to get help [\[show\]](#)

How to improve a draft [\[show\]](#)

Improving your odds of a speedy review [\[show\]](#)

Editor resources [\[show\]](#)

Declined by [Utopes](#) 2 seconds ago. Last edited by [Utopes](#) 2 seconds ago. Reviewer: [Inform author](#).

Resubmit Please note that if the issues are not fixed, the draft will be declined again.

The announcement we received from Wikipedia when Delia Garlic's page was declined for publication for being "not adequately supported by reliable sources."

When Garlic's page was declined, we felt it was unfairly reviewed compared to other articles we had seen on Wikipedia, which had the same number of citations—sometimes from questionable sources—as well as far less text and unserious subject matter. We wondered, why were those pages easily published while we had to prove Delia Garlic's worth? Why did we struggle to share rich information about a formerly enslaved woman, while absurd pages abound on Wikipedia, like [Beezin'](#) and [Unusual eBay Listings](#)?

Additionally, we were shocked that following the publication of Helen Garrison and Delia Garlic's pages, moderators appraised the articles for intellectual value in different fields. Under the category of women's history, Garrison's biography was marked as being of "mid-importance." Wikipedia defines the term as follows:

Complements or expands coverage of core or major topics. Material contained in the article may be useful for an understanding of women's history at an intermediate level.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, under the women's history field, Garlic's biography was deemed of "low-importance." Wikipedia explains this designation as:

Provides detailed or peripheral coverage of a narrowly defined topic with limited or localized impact. Omission of the article would not detract substantially from an understanding of women's history as a whole, but the article is of specialized or advanced interest.⁴⁶

In other words, according to Wikipedia editors, if Delia Garlic's page were deleted it would not "detract" from historical knowledge. This is an especially strange way of describing her biography considering the historical fame of the other actors and institutions listed alongside Garlic in the low-importance category of women's history on Wikipedia, whose pages are most definitely necessary to support "an understanding of women's history as a whole." For example, the prestigious all-women's school [Bryn Mawr College](#), which produced a plethora of illustrious graduates, and the [Flapper](#) girls, who define how people today view womanhood in the 1920s, are also designated as low-important.

Furthermore, it is striking that reviewers decided Garrison's page is mid-important while Garlic's is low-important, and there seems to be racial bias there. Garrison was a white woman who raised charity money for formerly enslaved people while hosting leftist friends in a comfortable cottage in Massachusetts. Meanwhile, Delia Garlic had been a slave who lived through the horrors of involuntary servitude and abuse, witnessed the shift from emancipation to

⁴⁵ "WikiProject Women's History/Assessment," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Women%27s_History/Assessment#Importance_scale.

⁴⁶ "WikiProject Women's History/Assessment," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Women%27s_History/Assessment#Importance_scale.

the Great Depression, and spoke directly to listeners about her experiences in a system of slavery that still underlies inequalities in America today. Labeling Garrison—a white woman of means—as being more important than Garlic—a Black woman and victim of slavery—seems unrealistic and unfair, as well as representative of the kinds of racial biases that Wikipedia moderators bring into the digital world from outside.

Finally, the mere fact that reviewers label female biographies according to their importance in women's history is appalling since there is no comparable category of men's history under which male biographies are classified according to importance. Thus, Wikipedia categorizes women as operating under a subsection of history, while male biographies are allowed to comprise history in itself. Wikipedians who categorize women's pages thus defend history as a male discipline, describing the past as belonging to men. As Simone de Beauvoir would have explained it, on Wikipedia the man (and his other-gendered collaborators) "defines woman not in herself but as relative to him."⁴⁷

Reflections and Advice for Future Wikipedia Editors

While composing our Wikipedia articles, we found that there were several lessons that we learned and would share with those both new and experienced in Wikipedia editing. There were some techniques that we employed to make our articles seem reliable in the eyes of other Wikipedians. We started by referencing every extant source that related to our subject's life in any possible way, demonstrating our page's extensive research background. Next, we wrote in a neutral tone such that potentially biased moderators would not feel politically threatened. We also added section headers and elaborated on the organizations, people, and events that our subjects were connected to, placing them firmly in a broader historical network.

Another helpful strategy that we employed while writing and publishing these biographies was specifically referencing and linking to other Wikipedia pages whenever possible. For example, consider the introductory paragraph to Delia Garlic's Wikipedia article, where the articles that we have linked are visible in purple and blue:

Delia Garlic (c. 1837 - ?) was a formerly enslaved woman originally from Virginia. Garlic is best known for her first-hand account of [enslavement](#), the [Civil War](#), and post-[emancipation](#) freedom. In 1937 when she was one hundred years old, the [Federal Writers' Project](#) of The Works Project Administration recorded her oral history, in [Montgomery, Alabama](#).^[1] During this testimony, she offered first-person testimony of the horrors of the slave trade, "when babies were snatched from their mothers breasts," and of being sold six times before emancipation.^{[2][3][4][5][6]}

⁴⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 15, <https://newuniversityinexileconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Simone-de-Beauvoir-The-Second-Sex-Jonathan-Cape-1956.pdf>.

Just in these few sentences, we were able to make helpful connections between Garlic and more popular pages on the platform. Not only will this allow for ease of access to additional information about the context of Garlic's life, but it will also make her page more visible in the long-run and easier to stumble upon through link surfing: "the process of starting on one article on a website and clicking on various hyperlinks to eventually finish on a different (...) article."⁴⁸

As Wikipedia's editorial and publication process can be rigorous, we encourage current and future Wikipedians to use the kinds of publication tactics mentioned above when writing articles or editing pre-existing ones. Such steps can lessen the likelihood of pages being rejected and removed, which in time will increase the overall representation of women on Wikipedia.

Conclusion

This project combines theory and praxis relating to women's representation on Wikipedia, in four social-scientific steps. First, we start by explaining how Wikipedia works as a community knowledge builder and as a powerful information source, which feeds into the Internet and real-world historical memory. Second, we consider the statistics and social theory surrounding women's representation in the content of the digital encyclopedia, as well as their participation in article-writing as Wikipedians. Third, we personally contribute content to Wikipedia—a kind of "experiment" leading to "results." Finally—our "results:" we detail our experiences of writing two Wikipedia articles, as case studies relating real article contributions to the social theories previously discussed.

Ultimately, the goal of this project is to encourage readers to contribute to Wikipedia as a form of social justice activism and in an effort to increase knowledge equity, democracy, and reliability in the world. By walking readers through how Wikipedia works, why it matters, and why their contributions are important, we hope this article will inform a wide audience of people who may or may not be already familiar with Wikipedia-writing. We hope that readers, regardless of their backgrounds, will feel inspired to join our Wikipedia community movement, and will feel valued as purposeful members of the great digital encyclopedia initiative.

⁴⁸ Wikipedia, "Link surfing," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Link_surfing.