

Labor and the New Encyclopedia [edit]

Dorothy Howard on unpaid knowledge work in a datalogical age



The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *Microsoft Encarta* proverbially died on January 15, 2001 – this was the year that dotcom entrepreneur Jimmy Wales and developer Larry Sanger launched Wikipedia: a portmanteau combining “wiki” (the Hawaiian word for quick) and “-pedia” (related to learning).

Wikipedia entered the scene quickly—scaling up to its current popularity by way of slacker students and serious researchers alike. Crowdsourced production has allowed for web content to exponentially grow into smaller niches and consumer markets, far surpassing its print predecessors. But with all this new content comes the necessity for the maintenance, info-curating, and fact-checking that have become increasingly shared collective and social burdens.

In today’s current information ecosystem, Wikipedia’s social good motive is to improve access to and accuracy of information, and it does so by the active recruitment of new editors. With the wave of urgent technologization, *hack-a-thons* and hacking events have become the norm. For Wikipedia, the *hack-a-thon* is an *Edit-a-thon*, a modified instructional tech-activism hybrid. Both the *hack-a-thon* and the *Edit-a-thon* are designed to increase productivity and lower the investment risk in speculative digital endeavors. And yet, systematic inequalities lead to discrepancies in the time certain populations can contribute to unpaid, crowdsourced projects, much less to learn the skills necessary to participate in them. It should be the focus of social good, crowdsourced projects like Wikipedia to consider whether the driving ethos that ‘information wants to be free’ is sympathetic to the physical realities

of those who are responsible for the maintenance and curation of this information. Otherwise, the endeavor risks becoming part of the trend towards high levels of cognitive labor associated with the replacement of jobs through the automation of industrial sectors, a trend now embedded in today’s high-tech knowledge economy.

1 Harnessing the Collective Intelligence of Volunteers

Like its forbearers in the open source movement, Wikipedia was founded on the notion of generativity, what Jonathan Zittrain calls ‘the procrastination principle’ – the release of intentionally incomplete systems which depend upon the anticipated improvements of unnamed community members who see value in the project. But with generativity comes the blurred lines among capitalization and social gifting/voluntary qualities of labor. The book *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything Today* is a scary rendition of Wikipedia to the eyes of business executives – offering insights into fiscally harnessing freely contributed, collective intelligence. The fruits of the open-source-driven internet continue to be replicated and capitalized on by proprietary projects, creating a troubling conundrum. Yet the open source movement’s supporters defend its underlying principles to the grave, arguing that the introduction of payment into projects would change the behavioral/economic motives of contributors and decrease the possible benefits of *crowdsourcing*. Modern states have increasingly relied on ethically-driven volunteer culture to do what the state or bureaucracy cannot or will not do – and this has been extended into the gathering and maintenance of information, and into information activism.

While *volunteering* is perceived as a fairly apolitical way to spend time, conservatives believe that government intervention decreases voluntary activities. The emergence of *social production* and faith-based nonprofits that are counted on to mediate mental health and veterans services in the U.S. and abroad grew out of small-government and *Christian ethics*. Yet when these social good services fill the role of preserving basic human rights to safety and well-being, but do so in a hierarchical manner, one returns to the foundational questions of the political economy: why have certain roles been left to volunteers and/or nonprofits? What are the drawbacks to self-organization? After all, Wikipedia is the most widely-read source of

art and artists. The cultural industries corresponding to these fields have taken notice and responded in significant ways, commissioning positions for **Wikipedians-in-Residence** (fully disclosed, like myself) at museums, libraries, and galleries – including The British Museum, The National Institute of Health, and national libraries around the world.

Wikipedians-in-Residence generally avoid breaking Wikipedia's strictly enforced **Conflict-of-Interest (COI)** policy because they restrict themselves from editing certain types of content to which they are too close. But while Wikipedia's COI policy mandates that Wikipedians disclose when they are financially compensated for editing as a means of deterring marketing firms and biased language from entering Wikipedia, many Wikipedians also take on highly administrative tasks in the encyclopedia itself that are also unpaid. Far below authoring articles, these include creating bots to automate tasks within the encyclopedia, arbitrating disputes, holding and organizing meetups, doing outreach with institutional partners, and creating sister projects like WikiSource, among others.

Open source projects do, of course, pay some contributors, such as developers, administrators, and outreach personnel. The Wikipedia Foundation keeps its paid staff to a scant number under 300—with most involved in development, fundraising, and initiatives-building. Its volunteer numbers, however, are comprised of upwards of 142,000 regular, internationally-distributed knowledge workers. But again, if you ask the average Wikipedia contributor if they would take money for their edits (if it were allowed), they would likely scoff. The idea of introducing money into the network is considered so obscene that doing so might jeopardize your own standing in the community.



Digital labor scholar Tiziana Terranova was one of the first to describe social media and crowdsourcing plat-

forms as electronic sweatshops for collapsing work and play, for creating 'Netslaves', and even 'glamorizing digital labor' – increasingly degrading knowledge work to the point of calling it volunteerism. Despite my admiration for the Wikipedia project, and for the overwhelming, genuine goodwill of its tens of thousands of volunteers, it would be hard not to read Wikipedia's massive, ethically-driven volunteer base as part of this 'glamorized digital labor'. Such realities have been described with **Donna Haraway's** notion, "informatics of domination": that is, the transitions of traditional hierarchies of domination and white capitalist patriarchy into more coded, biopolitical jargon of communications engineering and the optimized web, which increasingly reduces bodies to mere content contributors. The editor of a Wikipedia article is, according to this strain, alienated from the content they produce, masked behind the jargon of digital evangelism and the open web.

Virtual reality pioneer **Jaron Lanier** has been critical of Wikipedia in his recent books, *You Are Not a Gadget* (2010), *Who Owns the Future?* (2013) and *Information Is an Alienated Experience* (2006). In *You Are Not a Gadget*, he critiques Wikipedia for erasing the individual voice and point-of-view, which otherwise provides context for history, rather than replacing original content with content aggregation. Wikipedia's main problem is that it doesn't produce anything new; "knowledge of the human authorship of a text is suppressed in order to give the text superhuman validity." His point, while drastic, is duly noted – power differentials and access to education and technology privileges certain groups as knowledge producers. The interests of people who can afford to work on knowledge production for no direct compensation may become (indeed, may already be) over-represented in Wikipedia. Notability claims within the encyclopedia are influenced by the social, economic, gender and racial diversity (or lack thereof) of editors. Encyclopedias are never truly objective, even when assessed through a digitally distributed register.

Like Twitter, Wikipedia has been lauded as a site for digital activism – offering an opportunity to lower the barrier to participation in democratic processes. And yet, the utopia has not proven so easily executable as social class, gender, and race all factor into how much time people have to engage in online community building – let alone other unpaid administrative tasks. Digital volunteering entails digital labor invested in blogging, excessive posting and maintenance duties. Affective moderating, online harassment and gender gap disputes, and general fact-checking are all lumped together as 'data' maintenance.

In college, the obsession of editing Wikipedia overtook me quietly. It became an impulse. Only later did I realize that I could attend Wikipedia meetups, apply and be accepted as a proud **Wikipedian-in-Residence**, and could even approach Wikipedia with an activist stance. I still am engaged in these projects, and stand by them in so much as I support the open web and the dissolution of



proprietary copyright systems. However, there is a delicate but important line between information activism and digital labor that major crowdsourced projects cannot ignore.

The web as we know it, and the open source movement, is indebted to the labor of online volunteers. If introducing micropayments into the web sounds crazy, we might at least consider working toward systems that allow people to contribute to such social good projects while guaranteeing basic protections like affordable transportation, housing, and other basic needs.

When confronted, cultural understandings of what constitutes volunteering changes over time. Forms of digital volunteering are still largely yet to be reckoned with. In the meantime, the maintenance work of innovating and improving the web has increasingly been hoisted on the shoulders of volunteer heroes like Wikipedians, acting for the social good, serving as switchboards of knowledge like the phone operators of years past. But the digital volunteer's hands grow tired too, and we must continue by asking how the mushrooming digital global marketplace of ideas will be sustainable as its appetite continues to grow.