

CHAPTER 6

DO BLACK WIKIPEDIANS MATTER? CONFRONTING THE WHITENESS IN WIKIPEDIA WITH ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES

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Abstract

Wikipedia is in the top ten of the most visited websites in most places in the world and makes up the backbone of the Internet's information ecosystem. Despite the global presence of the website and its sister projects, the knowledges of the African diaspora, in particular the Caribbean, are poorly represented. This chapter introduces and outlines Black-led projects, campaigns, and initiatives both within and outside of the formal networks of the Wikipedia communities and the Wikimedia Foundation. The history and value of Black encyclopedic sources are explored and frame the important work by projects like Black Lunch Table, WikiNdaba, Ennegreciendo Wikipedia, and AfroCROWD, which were started to help these editors and bridge content gaps.

In June 2020, the Wikimedia Foundation released a statement in support of Black Lives highlighting the support they provide to U.S.-based projects. This was followed with criticism from the community on missed opportunities

to acknowledge the work and networks outside the United States of on-wiki communities, information activists, academics, independent scholars, and communities who often go unrecognized. This chapter explores how the system of white supremacy is a part of libraries and archives and Wikipedia; how Black-led shared knowledge information activists are circumventing the system; and suggestions for a more inclusive path forward.

Keywords

Black Wikipedians, White supremacy, Wikipedia, Libraries and archives.

Introduction

There is no way to talk about liberational value if you don't address the needs communities are facing. LGBT and black and indigenous communities—we need to have them as central. We need to center on justice and not be afraid of politics. Archives have never been neutral—they are the creation of human beings, who have politics in their nature. Centering the goals of liberation is at the heart of the issue.—Jarrett Drake (“Archives Have Never Been Neutral,” 2017, para. 7)

“While we are in the same STORM, we are not the same BOAT” (Barr, n.d.). Some, especially Black and Indigenous people, are facing other storms on top of two pandemics: systemic racism and COVID-19. Just a week after George Floyd’s death on June 3, 2020, the Wikimedia Foundation’s executive director Katherine Mayer and the chief operating officer Janeen Uzzell released a statement titled, “We Stand for Racial Justice” where the Foundation committed to supporting Black community members, readers, and editors and the movement for Black Lives (Maher & Uzzell, 2020). However, editors, especially Black editors, have been critical of the statement since they had not received this kind of public support prior to global protests for Black lives and in light of other corporations and institutions capitalizing on releasing statements tied to the Black Lives Matter movement. There were questions surrounding this statement: Will systemic change be addressed in the foundation and the Wikipedia movement? Will Black

Wikipedians be a part of shaping a plan for change? Is this simply performative or will there be action?

In their statement, Mayer and Uzzell (2020) highlighted campaigns, specifically *AfroCROWD*, *Black Lunch Table*, and *Whose Knowledge?*—three U.S.-based campaigns and affiliates that have a proximity to the Foundation. In the past, the Foundation had been critical of these groups through grant evaluations. These groups still are grant funded, but now their works are publicly promoted with the Foundation's backing. The statement also focused on the lived experiences of Black people in the United States and while the aim of it was to be supportive and inclusive of all, the statement potentially alienated other members of the Black diaspora. By excluding Black Wikipedia communities outside of the United States, who are not affiliated with the Foundation, they further marginalized the community that they desired to support.

There is a great deal of work to be done addressing white supremacy in libraries and archives. Librarians and archivists partially contribute to inequities in source materials and by defining authority. Black-led projects have been doing important and critical work around information activism connected to the African diaspora in Wikipedia. Where there is no content, some of these projects are creating it and opening conversations around authority of sources including marginalized communities' definition of what an authoritative source is.

Roots in White Supremacy: Libraries and Archives

The roots of many professions in the United States are in white supremacy. Librarianship in the United States is no different. Many library scholars, such as Hathcock (2015), Bourg (2014), Espinal (2001), Galvan (2015), Hall (2012), and Honma (2005), have documented and highlighted this in literature. Scholar and activist April Hathcock (2015) described the invisible normativity of whiteness in librarianship's origins as "a fundamental role in the profession from the start. Public libraries in the U.S. developed initially as sites of cultural

assimilation and ‘Americanization’ of immigrants needing to learn the mores of white society (Hall, 2012; Honma, 2005). Given the historical context, white normativity continues to be a hallmark of modern librarianship” (para. 4).

Although the way knowledge is organized is often perceived as neutral, classification systems are heavily biased. Sociologist Chris Bourq (2018) added, “Our classification systems are also not neutral. We use subject headings that center the straight, white, male, European experience; and are often racist and dehumanizing” (para. 36). Recent literature, for example, has established and documented that Melville Dewey, often called the “father of modern librarianship” and creator of the Dewey Decimal Classification System, had a history of antisemitism, racism, and misogyny (Blakemore, 2018; Flood, 2019; Ford, 2018; Gooding-Call, 2019; Lindell, 2019; Oster, 2019). The earliest iterations of his classification system had his bigotry woven into it, and the system is still used to organize information throughout the English-speaking world. Similarly, the Library of Congress Classification system, which was mainly adopted by large academic libraries, did not include any Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) when it was created. In the 1930s and 1940s, librarians and information activists like Alfred Kaiming Chiu and Dorothy Porter began to change these systems to make the works of BIPOC content creators more visible in the systems designed to erase them (Liu, 2000; 裘开明_百度百科 (Qiú kāimíng_bǎidù bǎikē), n.d.; Nunes, 2018).

Black Scholars Building Encyclopedic Knowledge

Before Dorothy Porter, a librarian, bibliographer, and curator at Howard University who started identifying white supremacy in the Dewey Decimal system in the 1930s and 1940s, Black information activists helped pave the way for her important work. In the early 1900s, sociologist, journalist, and activist W. E. B. Du Bois took a different route to changing the system. Instead of trying to change the popular encyclopedia of the day, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Du Bois sought to publish nothing less than the equivalent of a black *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, believing that such a broad assemblage of biography, interpretive

essays, facts, and figures would do for the much denigrated black world of the twentieth century what Britannica and Denis Diderot's *Encyclopedie* had done for the European world of the eighteenth century" (Gates & Appiah, 2007). He envisioned a four-volume, two-million-word *Encyclopedia Africana*, which would be a comprehensive knowledge of the history, cultures, and institutions of the people of African descent. The announcement of this project celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and the "tercentenary of the Landing of the Negro" (Du Bois, 1909a). In a letter to Dr. Edward W. Blyden, a leading Pan-Africanist and scholar of Islam in Africa, Du Bois wrote that although the advisory board would consist of eminent "white scholars" that the "real work I want done by Negroes" (Du Bois, 1909b). In 1909, Du Bois invited over sixty Black scholars to participate in the project and wrote to at least fourteen white scholars for "co-operation and advice."

Du Bois' idea was first materialized by historian Carter G. Woodson who founded the *Encyclopedia of the Negro* with support from the Phelps-Stokes Fund. However, Woodson's work did not deter Du Bois' attempts. Through the 1930s and 1940s he worked to secure funding and build his editorial structure while arguing with Woodson who claimed that Du Bois stole the idea from him and was critical of Du Bois for only wanting Black scholars to contribute to the encyclopedia. In the beginning, Du Bois struggled to get his vision off the ground and published parts of it in journals. It wasn't until 1960, when the president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, invited him to move to the country and fund the project, that he started writing the encyclopedia on African soil (Gates, 2000). In 1962 at a conference to launch the encyclopedia, Du Bois expanded on his grand visionary project, "The encyclopedia hopes to eliminate the artificial boundaries created on this continent by colonial masters. Designations such as 'British Africa,' 'French Africa,' 'Black Africa,' 'Islamic Africa' too often serve to keep alive differences which in large part have been imposed on Africans by outsiders. The encyclopedia must have research units throughout West Africa, North Africa, East, Central and South Africa which will gather and record information for these geographical sections of

the continent. The encyclopedia is concerned with Africa as a whole” (p. 216). Du Bois died before he could see the work through to completion. Committed to the dream, the Secretariat for the Encyclopedia Africana published three volumes throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The project was revived in the 1970s by three young scholars at the University of Cambridge. All from different places in the Black world, these three scholars included an African American, Henry Gates, Jr.; a Nigerian, Wole Soyinka; and a Ghanaian British, Kwame Appiah. They expanded on Du Bois’ vision to include scholars not only from the African continent but also from the diaspora. In 1999, Perseus Books and Microsoft Corporation funded and published the 2.5 million word project including the work of about 400 scholars on CD-ROM and the five-volume paper version *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (Appiah & Gates, Jr., n.d.).

Doing the Work, but Is It Our Responsibility?

Black people are often expected to do race labor for friends and or family and even be the Black expert on anti-racism in their workplace (Buckingham, 2018; Nichole, 2020). This work is exhausting. Author Alanah Nichole (2020) wrote, “You don’t pay Black people enough—or at all—for the emotional labor and anti-racism work that some of you are asking for” (para. 1). Changing systems, removing gatekeepers and barriers, and eradicating white supremacy is not the responsibility or work of Black people. It is the responsibility of those that benefit and have the privilege and power from those systems. Participation in such work is optional and often strategic to preserve mental and physical health. Black Wikipedia editors and organizers choose to organize in the community around this work even though it is not their responsibility, and they should not be expected to do this work.

Black women face both marginalization and tokenization in white spaces like Wikipedia; however, they are often at the forefront of organizing projects and communities platforming BIPOC voices in the Wikipedia movement. After experiencing erasure and systemic disparities on Wikipedia, these leaders still decided to organize, fill gaps by

creating knowledges, and partnering with libraries and archives in different ways. The following groups are a small sum of all of the projects and leaders in the movement to shape a more inclusive Wikipedia.

Black Lunch Table

Artists and educators Jina Valentine and Heather Hart founded Black Lunch Table (BLT) in 2014. They attended an artists' retreat and quickly realized that they were the only Black people there, so they decided to sit with one another at lunch, which inspired the name Black Lunch Table (H. Hart, personal communication, August 25, 2020). They came to editing Wikipedia in the late 2000s, but Hart was briefly deterred when an article she wrote about a musician was speedily deleted (H. Hart, personal communication, August 25, 2020). Valentine and Hart did not try again until around 2014 when they contacted well-known artists to make them aware that they had no presence on the Wikipedia. Valentine and Hart further educated and encouraged the Black arts community around the impact of editing. Soon after, they hosted their first BLT edit-a-thon at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and they have been organizing these events ever since. Hart and Valentine understand the lack of visibility in Wikipedia is not the only place where Black artists' stories are not readily accessible. To add breadth and depth to oral histories, they decided to interview and document the work of Black artists through their creation of BLT and a partnership with the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Hart and Valentine have partnered with both museums and libraries nationally and abroad.

Wiki Indaba

In 2013, Wiki Indaba started as the first Wikipedia regional conference on the continent of Africa (D. Ndubane, personal communication, September 18, 2020). This conference is an official Wikimedia-funded conference that aims to build community around African Wikipedians and to increase growth and coverage of African Wikimedia Projects. Now it has grown to include other African countries and the African diaspora. While the conference itself doesn't partner with libraries and archives, the affiliates do run partnered programs, which include

Wikimedia South Africa, Wikimedia Community User Group Ghana, Open West Foundation, Wikimedia Community User Group Nigeria, and Wikimedia Community User Group Uganda (D. Ndubane, personal communication, October 15, 2020).

Ennegreciendo Wikipedia/Noircir Wikipedia/Blackening Wikipedia
Wikipedians AfricanadeCuba and Galahmm founded a global campaign that has Wikipedia projects in English and French, which started in 2018, and in Spanish and Catalan, which launched in 2019. In French, the project is referred to as *Noircir Wikipedia*, in Spanish as *Ennegreciendo Wikipedia*, in Catalan as *Trobades Ennegrint Viquipèdia*, and in English as *Blackening Wikipedia*. All four projects work to increase and improve references, articles, and information about African and Afro-descendant diaspora culture on Wikipedia. Blackening Wikipedia is multilingual and aims to organize all over the diaspora.

AfroCROWD

In 2015, lawyer and activist Alice Backer was recruited by a Wikipedian at a Global Voices Summit, an international, multilingual volunteer community. This Wikipedian shared with Backer his cognizance of the white-centric homogenous community that existed then and still does now (A. Backer, personal communication, August 29, 2020). After attending a BLT edit-a-thon, Backer was inspired and started AfroCROWD in an attempt to bring Black voices into the movement and diversify content on the platform.

With the initial intention to organize in local Black communities, Backer learned access to technology and space was not equitable. However, libraries often provided computer rooms for community-organized events. Backer started having AfroCROWD events at the Brooklyn Public Library. Backer is currently taking a step back and allowing the executive director to steer the campaign. She still edits but enjoys the freedom from the stress of dealing with of the bureaucracy of Wikipedia and the Foundation's grants committee (A. Backer, personal communication, August 29, 2020).

BIPOC in the Built

While working with communities in the art, architecture, and planning professions across multiple U.S. institutions, Kai Alexis Smith, author of this chapter, noticed the lack of visibility of BIPOC contributors connected to the built environment in Wikipedia content and the lack of secondary source material of BIPOC individuals that didn't work at large institutions or firms and/or weren't "big names" in the profession. In summer 2020, Smith partnered with the student chapter of National Organization of Minority Architects and student group of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning's Students of Color Committee with support from the School of Architecture and Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to launch the first *BIPOC in the Built* edit-a-thon. Inspired by Porter, Du Bois, and Gates, Jr., Smith is building a coalition of practitioners, scholars, and librarians around ways to fill these gaps with contributions to Wikipedia. Smith educates and organizes around this campaign in the United States and abroad.

The Future Is Black

Search engines and other technologies also create barriers to sources in libraries and archives, and equitable access to information in person and online. Digital access is lauded as the great equalizer, but it simply emphasizes the problem of unequal access. Many sources are behind paywalls, and computer scientist and digital activist Joy Buolamwini and cofounder and codirector of the UCLA Center for Critical Internet Inquiry Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) both document that the algorithms behind commercial search engines like Google are biased and reinforce racism (Lee, 2020; Tucker, 2017). This extends to the technology used to create content added to Wikipedia, Wikidata, and WikiCommons.

Cofounder of Wikipedia Jimmy Wales said the aim of Wikipedia is to provide access to the sum of all human knowledge ("Wikipedia," 2020). Wikipedia is a community-based platform created in Western society, which is organized and governed with white supremacy.

Westernized people designed the systems that govern Wikipedia; therefore, Wikipedia is flawed and a reflection of society. Wikipedia inherently has white supremacy woven throughout its systems and governance. “While we try to be neutral our work on Wikipedia will always involve bias. Bias can appear in many areas like Wikipedia’s policies, practices, content, and participation,” qualitative research analyst Jackie Koerner (2019) wrote in the article entitled “Wikipedia Has a Bias Problem,” Bias leads to barriers to inclusion. These barriers mean imbalanced participation and distorted knowledge. Most recognizable barriers relate to contributor retention, emerging communities, and content exclusion” (p. 4). In essence, Wikipedia has the same problems experienced in the fields of librarianship and archival science.

Wikipedia was not designed for Black people and they were not involved in its creation. In fact, the system of white supremacy is working the way it was designed, to marginalize dissenting opinions that are critical of the Wikipedia platform. Some examples of this include the exclusion of sources from African, Black, and Indigenous communities that are deemed authoritative by these very communities. Wikipedia relies on Western media sources that often negatively document Black people, exploiting and profiting off of their suffering (Kulaszewicz, 2015; Sancto, 2018). Western news sources also have origins in white supremacy (Gonzalez & Torres, 2011; Mathis, 2018). There is often the rapid deletion of articles on Black topics (D. Cuba, personal communication, September 11, 2020). This creates a barrier for editors learning to contribute to the Wikipedia platform and often deters them from the desire to continue contributing.

There is much more to be done both by accomplices or collaborators for Black Wikipedians and information equity in libraries and archives in general. This brings us back to what the Wikipedia Foundation can do to provide equitable solutions for Black editors on Wikipedia. The Foundation periodically surveys contributors, among other things, to measure gender (“Community Insights/2018 Report—Meta,” n.d.). However, the survey does not identify race, ethnicity, or people from marginalized communities within the Wikipedia community. Therefore, there is no data to show how editors from Africa and the African diaspora are represented among those who make the encyclopedia.

A low-stakes way to support Black lives is to measure race and ethnicity among the community as they do gender.

Another idea for change is to update Wikipedia's Five Pillars policy, which have not been changed since the platform was founded. If the community and the Foundation are committed to change and not claiming neutrality, they can benefit from the principles of the Design Justice Network, a community of design practitioners and community organizers that work in social justice ("Design Justice Network," n.d.). The principles would be one framework that could be used to revise the pillars of Wikipedia and invite BIPOC into the room to redesign this community encyclopedia. Educator and founder of Design Justice Network Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) advocates for design liberation and exclaimed that concepts can help people "move beyond the frames of social impact design or design for good or human centered design to challenge people working on design processes to think about how good intentions are not enough to make sure design processes and practices are really tools for liberation. And to develop, together, principles that might help practitioners avoid what is often an unwitting production of existing equalities" (Guzman, 2020, para. 8). More examples include decentering Western white sources as the only "authoritative" sources and inviting BIPOC to the table to reimagine the sources they deem authoritative for usage in Wikipedia and for the Foundation to support more Black leaders and information activists in their efforts to make Wikipedia more equitable through grant funding.

Conclusion

Black people live with a cognitive dissonance within the diaspora between burning the house (system) down or grabbing a hose and putting the fire out (Belafonte, 2008). Within Wikipedia, libraries, and archives, personal values and behaviors have to match. Prior to COVID-19 and during the pandemic, Black Wikipedian leaders, organizers, and information activists are partnering, organizing within, and creating new knowledge resources to make information more equitable and accessible through Wikipedia, libraries, and archives. We are at a

pivotal time in history as we live through two pandemics that are colliding to impact civil rights and change information systems and hopefully global systems as we know them. Author Arundhati Roy (2020) framed this moment and a pathway forward.

“Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it” (para. 46 and 47).

There is a preference for the latter. The intention of this chapter is to be a catalyst with which to spark and continue thought that leads to action around organizing priorities within Wikipedia, and libraries and archives that include Black people.

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