

20 Equity, Policy, and Newcomers: Five Journeys from Wiki Education

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We tell the story of Wikipedia's engagement with equity and policy by weaving together five stories of individuals who became Wikipedians—and who all work for Wiki Education to envision a future where Wikipedia has more diverse content and contributors.

When you edit Wikipedia, you step into a great human endeavor, the largest collective project ever. In this essay, we weave together five stories of becoming Wikipedians into a narrative that tells a part of Wikipedia's story around equity and policy in a way that no single narrative could tell—and leads to a future in which Wikipedia has more diverse content and contributors through Wiki Education's programs.

Ian Ramjohn first edited Wikipedia in 2004 after seeing a segment about it on a BBC magazine program then known as *Click Online*. Sage Ross joined in 2005 as a more interesting use of his time in graduate school than writing a term paper. Ryan McGrady created his account in 2007 but spent his first few years learning about the community—for him, Wikipedia was primarily an academic object for study. LiAnna Davis became a Wikipedian in 2010 when she worked to launch the education program for the Wikimedia Foundation. Elysia Webb joined Wikipedia in 2017 as a participant in Wiki Education's Student Program.

Our experiences tell us that what built Wikipedia in the first decade led it to plateau in the second decade—and won't enable Wikipedia to survive the coming decades. The "if you build it, they will come" philosophy leads to a certain type of contributor—the naturally engaged Wikipedian. Naturally engaged Wikipedians are people like us: we came to Wikipedia because we believe in the vision of the sum of all human knowledge, and we have the privilege of education, the tenacity to engage in sometimes challenging

online spaces, and the time to devote to volunteering in service of Wikipedia. We filled its editor ranks in the first decade. Over time we developed policies designed to codify quality standards. But in our single-minded pursuit of quality, we ended up creating a labyrinth of rules and guidelines that keeps all but the most dedicated newcomers out. We naturally engaged Wikipedians, a relatively homogeneous group, also failed to spend enough time considering how all our rules reified systemic bias. That led to Wikipedia's plateau in its second decade as active editor numbers flatlined after an initial spurt of growth.

Why is this problematic? Because the sum of all human knowledge isn't just in the hands of people like us. It requires more diverse content and more diverse contributors, people who have knowledge to share but don't find Wikipedia's structure conducive to sharing that knowledge. The policies developed by well-meaning early Wikipedians have led to the inequities that exist today in English Wikipedia's content and contributors. And if we don't fix our problems, thereby enabling new voices and new content, Wikipedia will cease to be the world's go-to resource for quality information.

We can solve these issues by systematically bringing new contributors to Wikipedia at scale through structured programs like those we run at Wiki Education. Our individual backgrounds with Wikipedia have led us to understand and reflect on Wikipedia's equity issues and how policy has reinforced them. And through our programs, we see a path forward to ensure open knowledge is even more representative, accurate, and complete in the coming decades.

Telling Our Stories

For Ian Ramjohn, what hooked him in Wikipedia from the start was the sense of empowerment. Traditionally, knowledge creation was a top-down process that was centered in the developed world. Knowledge creation was—and still is, in many ways—an imperialist venture. The fact that Ian was able to fix incorrect and out-of-date information about Trinidad and Tobago (his home country) changed the way he related to the world.

“When you come from a small, relatively unimportant developing country, what gets written about you is what other people have to say,” Ian explains. “Maybe there's the occasional interested scholar who can change ‘harmless’ to ‘*mostly* harmless’ in the entry about you, but you're always, at best, a bug under the microscope.”

Sage Ross joined Wikipedia in 2005. His first efforts were driven by a desire to fill gaps: “I basically dumped a term paper into a new article about the history of atomism.” Six months later, he returned because he had another term paper to write but one he had lost all interest in. “That’s when I actually became a Wikipedian, primarily to avoid writing a term paper.”

His initial writing was linked to his field of doctoral work—he wrote about the history of science, he curated articles, and he organized a Wiki-Project around the topic. Around this time, Sage also grew interested in *The Signpost*, Wikipedia’s community newspaper, first as a reader, then as a contributor, focusing on what academics were saying about Wikipedia. A gap in the production of *The Signpost* led Sage to take over as temporary editor and, eventually, as editor in chief.

Ryan McGrady created his Wikipedia account in 2007. Initially he mostly lurked, trying to understand how Wikipedia worked. He spent a lot of time digging through policy talk pages, notice boards, and their archives. He saw Wikipedia primarily as an academic object for research. Over time, he became an evangelist for Wikipedia, talking about it in classes and working to promote understanding of it. In 2012, he used Wikipedia as a teaching tool in his classes and had his students contribute content. It was only after he started teaching with Wikipedia that he felt the need to jump in and become a full-fledged Wikipedia contributor.

The English Wikipedia saw its greatest growth in 2005–2007, and after that growth it entered a period of sharp decline. As Joseph Reagle recounts in chapter 1, the demise of Wikipedia had been predicted pretty much from the beginning of the project, but the post-2007 period was one of real decline. The number of active editors fell precipitously, and academics, journalists, and Wikipedians themselves started questioning the viability of the project. In an effort to counter this decline, the Wikimedia Foundation started engaging in programmatic work. Frank Schulenburg, who at the time was head of public outreach, had noticed a trend: Wikipedia editors who were also university instructors were assigning students to edit Wikipedia as a class assignment, and this was a successful way of bringing more high-quality content from new contributors to Wikipedia. But it was challenging to use Wikipedia as a teaching tool unless you had deep Wikipedia expertise as a contributor yourself. Frank assembled a team to provide that expertise so teaching with Wikipedia could be expanded to non-Wikipedian faculty.

Sage, the graduate student turned *Signpost* editor, was recruited to join the team. So was LiAnna Davis, who had studied Wikipedia academically but hadn't made many contributions. Her role was to do communications for the pilot of this new program, and she spent time speaking to the media about it, communicating with existing Wikipedians, and creating help resources for student editors in the program.

"The best way to really learn how to do something yourself is to train others to do it," LiAnna says. "I quickly learned the ins and outs of Wikipedia, so I could distill the most important elements down for our program participants."

By 2012, the program LiAnna and Sage worked on had reached a plateau within the Wikimedia Foundation, but it still had unfulfilled potential. In 2013, the Wikimedia Foundation spun off the program into an independent organization called Wiki Education. LiAnna and Sage became staff of the new organization and, within a year, brought Ian and Ryan on board too.

Elysia Webb's introduction to Wikipedia was different. For her, Wikipedia had always been around—it was just another part of the infrastructure of the internet. She was introduced to the idea of editing Wikipedia as part of a Wiki Education–supported class she took as a graduate student in 2017. While this was an assignment she was doing for class, she was also motivated because she was writing about something she really cared about—the bat species she was studying for her master's degree. This experience demystified the editing process.

She came to Wikipedia believing that it was a fairly complete work but soon realized that there were large gaps in the coverage of bats. This changed her perception from "I can edit" to "I *should* edit." The size of the task was daunting: 75 percent of bat articles were stubs, meaning more than one thousand articles on bats needed improvement. But, she thought, "if I don't do it, who will?" Elysia started actively contributing content during her free time, quickly racking up thousands of edits. In 2018, Elysia also joined Wiki Education's staff.

Comparing and Contrasting Our Experiences

The five of us have similarities in our motivation and evolution as editors and some notable differences.

We all identified gaps in Wikipedia's coverage and saw ourselves as having the tools to help fill those gaps. Sage, Elysia, and Ian were all motivated to become Wikipedians because of this—they saw gaps in coverage, recognized that they each had the skills to fill those gaps, and felt an obligation to fill those gaps. Ryan came to that realization along the way by finding things that were missing and that he wanted to write about. LiAnna, on the other hand, has always worked at scale to fill content gaps. She was hired by the Wikimedia Foundation to recruit people in academia to work to fill these gaps.

Our integration into the community came in different ways. Sage, Ryan, and LiAnna were drawn into the community by getting to know other Wikimedians at events and meetups. Getting to know the people behind the accounts, getting to know people in real life, were major factors in drawing them into the community. As Sage notes, "Meetups helped solidify me feeling like I had a place in the community."

Elysia's integration into the community came through content collaboration and WikiProjects and later through her experiences with colleagues at Wiki Education. Like LiAnna, Elysia's professional life intersected with Wikipedia quite early on in her Wikipedia career.

Ian's integration into the community sits in contrast to these—he built his sense of community by editing controversial topics. He edited the race article, and he also edited articles in the areas of US politics, evolution, intelligent design, and climate change. On the race article, both his ally and his opponent became on-wiki friends of his. He formed friendships with like-minded editors in the other areas as well. Many of these friendships were formed "in the trenches," trying to serve as a bulwark against editors who were organized off-wiki.

Wikipedia is a global community, but for Sage, Ryan, and Elysia, the global experience came later. Ian, on the other hand, found himself editing alongside a mixture of editors from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, India, and continental Europe. The editor who nominated him for adminship is Czech. National varieties of English were important to him from the beginning because he preferred not to use American spelling for articles about Trinidad and Tobago. While LiAnna's first year was spent focusing primarily on supporting programs in the United States, by 2011 she had moved into a global role, working to grow education programs in

India, Brazil, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia while also supporting affiliate-led efforts in a dozen additional countries globally.

By 2018, however, all five of us were staff of Wiki Education, united in our professional mission to improve English Wikipedia content at scale by empowering subject matter experts to fill content gaps.

Thinking About Equity

When Ian joined Wikipedia, the opportunities seemed vast. In 2004 the “write what you know” ethos still prevailed in Wikipedia. The content on Wikipedia should be verifiable, certainly, but few people expected references to be right there in the article. For Ian, equity was the reason he was on Wikipedia—here was an opportunity to present the developing world on similar footing to the developed world to ensure that just as every town in the United States had a Wikipedia article, so too might every town in the developing world. He wanted to build up the corpus of articles that were about places and people that probably wouldn’t matter to most readers in the developed world but that *would* matter if the goal of Wikipedia really was to gather the sum-total of human knowledge.

At the same time, Ian encountered racism from the beginning. An early interaction with a neo-Nazi led him to find an administrator (admin) to ask for help. The neo-Nazi was blocked from editing Wikipedia, but other less disruptive people still existed, people who followed the rules but who promoted “racial realism” or who spoke of “white pride.” One of Ian’s on-wiki friends, an African American woman, received nonstop harassment that included having pictures of lynchings regularly posted to her user page. While the community blocked these harassers on sight, it was obvious that dealing with these people was a major impediment to her ability to contribute to Wikipedia.

For Ian, recognition of the problem of gender equity came slowly. In a world where “male” is the default normal and people edit behind pseudonyms, it’s easy to slip into acceptance that things are the way they are on Wikipedia. The presence of a few prominent women among the community of editors made it easy to miss the scarcity of women in general. But it became impossible to miss the fact that the people who were targeted for harassment, the people who were driven out, tended to be women.

Sage was attracted to the project because of the vision of a world where everyone had access to the sum total of human knowledge; his academic background gave an excellent context for understanding the role that sourcing could play. “As a historian of science, I was keenly aware of the idea of knowledge as a socially embedded process because that was pretty central to my daily intellectual work,” Sage says. “I understood the reasons behind the unevenness of topic areas, the massive privilege-based coverage of what’s on Wikipedia, the root problems with sourcing being embedded in a broader cultural issue of how rules and norms reify those things.”

Working on *The Signpost* strengthened his understanding of the problem of systemic bias on Wikipedia. Reading what others were writing about Wikipedia and looking at the project itself with a journalistic eye brought this issue to the forefront. But it wasn’t until he attended his first few meetups that the issue of gender imbalance in the Wikipedia community became “viscerally obvious.”

Sage gave a lightning talk at a New York conference about the egregious examples of gender bias present in Wikimedia Commons, the image repository for Wikipedia. Off-wiki, he bonded with the handful of influential women in the US editing community and spent hours discussing gender bias on Wikipedia with them.

Wikipedia’s systemic bias was a key factor in LiAnna’s ongoing work with Wikipedia. When she joined, survey results had just shown more than 90 percent of Wikipedia’s editors identified as male.

“As a woman, I clearly can help fix the gender bias simply by being an active community member,” LiAnna says. “But I took a different approach to devoting my time to Wikipedia. I set out to see how I could—at scale—empower others who don’t identify as male to contribute.”

Colleges and universities turned out to be a great place to start as the higher education population in the United States is around 60 percent female. As director of programs for Wiki Education, LiAnna oversaw work to target academic faculty related to race, gender, and sexuality, bringing more and more diverse contributors to Wikipedia through class assignments. (See chapter 14 for Alexandria Lockett’s experiences with this as a teacher.) LiAnna occasionally contributes content herself, but she sees her biggest achievement as overseeing the scaling of a program that now supports sixteen thousand students in editing Wikipedia each year. The

program as a whole does way more to improve Wikipedia's coverage of systemic bias topic areas and bringing new contributor voices than any one volunteer editing individually could.

This focus on equity has been a driving force of our work at Wiki Education. Even staff who didn't previously appreciate how prevalent the content gaps are on Wikipedia are now fully dedicated to reducing systemic bias.

For Ryan, the importance of equity and the issue of systemic bias came to the forefront through involvement in both Wiki Education and the Wikimedia New York chapter. His initial academic interest in Wikipedia had focused on accuracy, but over time, he slowly came to realize the real challenge facing Wikipedia was in equity issues.

"My whole concept of criticism of Wikipedia moved from reliability and accuracy to systemic bias," Ryan says. "I realized reliability had been resolved, our understanding of that is well established, but equity is both important and interesting. I have a much more heightened awareness of how who has written Wikipedia influences it."

Elysia, as a female scientist by education, was taken aback when she first learned of Wikipedia's gender bias.

"I'm in the biological sciences, which has a male slant, but it's really pretty even, especially in the field of bats. There are many women bat scientists," Elysia explains. "So I didn't really think about equity when I was just writing content. I kept being misgendered, people would assume I was a man, which was a little odd. Since I started this position with Wiki Education, I've started seeing editing Wikipedia as more of a revolutionary act in terms of equity and representation. I've identified there are a lot of systemic biases to why people don't contribute."

Thinking About Policies

Attracting Wikipedians who don't look like or think like the typical Wikipedian is an important tool for adding content that would otherwise not get added because the existing community members haven't prioritized these issues. But having more diverse voices among the editing community is also important for discussions around interpreting notability and reliable source guidelines.

Wikipedia reflects the biases of the wider world. Scientists are more difficult to write about than athletes because more news articles are written

about athletes. But “reliable sourcing” is culturally determined—the decision to accept a source as “reliable” or “not reliable” depends on the people who choose to become involved in the decision. Sometimes it’s just a matter of trusting the word of a Wikipedian you’ve come to believe is knowledgeable. A discussion about the reliability of the *Daily Mail* in 2017 attracted more than seventy informed participants. A similar discussion about a Zimbabwian publication would likely attract few participants.

Policies and guidelines like “reliable sources” and “notability” are where many of Wikipedia’s systemic bias conflicts emerge. To understand the issue, it’s important to look back at the history of policy development on Wikipedia.

Wikipedia entered a time of dramatic change between late 2005 and early 2007. The editing community grew explosively, and culture was less likely to be passed from established editors to new editors. Newcomers were more likely to interact with other newcomers. Written policies became more important because it wasn’t possible to just follow what the established editors were doing. Policies became harder to change as they no longer just described how the community did things—increasingly they described how the community should do things.

“In the early days, thanks to its sourcing policies, Wikipedia was a breakwater that the waves of propaganda crashed against,” Ian recalls. “Policies are important. But as Wikipedia got more complete, as its policies have ossified, it’s harder to make change.”

One of the biggest social markers in the community is becoming an administrator. As policies solidified, it became harder and harder to go through the adminship process. Sage tried to make a stand with his own request for adminship (RfA), one of the myriad complex Wikipedia processes.

“In reporting for *The Signpost*, looking at trends in how editors were joining the community, active editor trends, adminship trends, and other broader discussions going on at the time, I decided the bar was ratcheting up too much,” Sage says. “I wanted to get back to the idea that adminship is no big deal, and I decided that I was probably about as active and dedicated to Wikipedia as I was ever likely to be, so I may as well test it, make a point, push back in whatever way I could to the ratcheting up of the bureaucracy. So I said I wasn’t going to answer any of the supposedly optional questions. And I passed anyway.”

Sage's stand gave him the admin rights—but sadly didn't result in the culture change he was hoping for. And the bureaucracy has only gotten more ossified over the years.

“By the time I started paying attention, the rules were already in a state where they were hard to change,” Ryan says. “They've only gotten more so over time. When I started, you could still make bold changes. For a major change, you'd get pushback, and it would go to an RfC [request for comment]. But you could still make a bold change and it might stick—now, those days seem to be gone.”

Coming Together at Wiki Education

If an experienced editor like Ryan can't make bold changes stick, imagine how challenging it is for a newcomer to Wikipedia, twenty years into the project. If they attempt to do more than fix a typo, newcomers are met with welcome messages that point them to hundreds of policy and guideline pages, and running the gauntlet of “new pages patrol” or “articles for creation” tends to make them abandon Wikipedia quickly.

“As the community grows inward-looking, it's harder to add fresh blood,” Ian says. “So we need new ways, like bringing students in, like training subject matter experts. We fight new battles because we can—equity matters because Wikipedia matters. When Wikipedia was mostly porn stars and Pokémon, it wasn't important, so people didn't care what percentage of biographies of scientists were of women—we were happy to have a few articles on Nobel laureates. But because no one cared about equity early on, it's a huge hill to climb.”

Against this backdrop, the five of us—along with our exceptional colleagues—are climbing that hill. We have managed to enable tens of thousands of new editors to effectively contribute content to Wikipedia, especially in content areas previously undercovered because of systemic bias issues. Using our own experiences and histories, we've actively worked within the ossified policies of Wikipedia to overcome systemic bias challenges and bring more equitable content to the project.

Only a tiny fraction of the students, like Elysia, contribute in a sustained, ongoing fashion, mirroring the retention challenge of other outreach projects. Some have posited that Wikipedia isn't retaining new editors because of technical challenges with the editing interface, or talk pages being too

outdated, or grumpy community members. These are admittedly challenges newcomers face, but Wiki Education has shown that it's possible, with the right training and support, for almost anyone to make a meaningful contribution to Wikipedia. Being a Wikipedian is more than just one engagement with the encyclopedia: it entails ongoing work of writing content, participating in discussions, and editing others' work. Our experience successfully onboarding tens of thousands of new editors who move on after writing one article leads us to the conclusion that anyone can make a meaningful contribution, but only a small fraction will feel the calling to stay engaged as Wikipedians. Most Wikipedians were Wikipedians before they ever hit the edit button.

"Potential Wikipedians are extremely rare. The people who become people like us, for the most part, show up on Wikipedia and feel like they've come home," Ian says. "They feel like this is what they 'need' to do with their lives."

That's why we see large-scale programs like the ones we run at Wiki Education to be so critical for the future of Wikipedia. To survive, Wikipedia needs to nurture the existing community while simultaneously offering programs at scale to attract more equitable content and contributors. And if those contributors simply fill one content gap and move on, that's okay: not everyone is a naturally engaged Wikipedian. But Wikipedia still needs their voice. And that's why programs like ours are so important.

We haven't always gotten the model right. When the program started in 2010, Sage was in charge of recruiting expert Wikipedians who would volunteer to help onboard new student editors into the ways of the community. We originally envisioned the process would work through volunteer energy, just as many of us had joined the community.

"At the time I joined the staff, I didn't have an acute sense of the ways that the potential of the idea of Wikipedia was being actively constrained by the scale of the community," Sage says. "It became clear that the sort of volunteer energy, capacity, and flexibility to turn their collective energy to a big task is actually quite small. Individually, we can do tons of stuff. But in a time where Featured Article nominations are closed not because they had flaws but because there wasn't enough reviewer interest, Wikipedia as a process and entity on its own is severely constrained by the scale of its core community."

Our experience has taught us that the idea that volunteers have the energy and ability to grow the community only works to a certain point—the point

English Wikipedia reached within the first decade. And it only attracts the type of person who is willing to navigate the labyrinth of Wikipedia policies and guidelines to share knowledge. But not everybody whose knowledge we want is participating or even can participate. That's why organizations like Wiki Education are so critical to Wikipedia's future.

LiAnna and Sage—along with other original Wiki Education colleagues—set out to overcome the constraint of volunteer energy by developing a program model that doesn't rely on volunteers. LiAnna led program development to scale, from supporting three thousand students a year when Wiki Education spun off from the Wikimedia Foundation to supporting sixteen thousand students a year, without growing the staff dedicated to that program. We accomplished this in part because Sage has led the technical development of a suite of software tools called the Dashboard that have enabled us to streamline our processes. Ian and Elysia joined staff to serve in a role we call "Wikipedia Experts," who provide human support for when our automated systems aren't enough to answer program participants' questions.

"Through our Dashboard software and our process-driven approach to staff time allocation, we were able to eliminate many of the bottlenecks to scaling," LiAnna explains. "Our online trainings explain to newcomers exactly what they need to know in language they can understand—and our Wikipedia Experts are exceptional at jumping in as a friendly helper to resolve cases where challenges arise."

While the Student Program is our flagship, we also offer other programs targeted at different audiences. Ryan, for example, works on our Wiki Scholars & Scientists Program, where we lead subject matter experts through a twelve-week course on editing Wikipedia and provide certification on successful completion of the course. An interesting finding so far in this program has been that many of our course participants had existing Wikipedia accounts. They'd tried to edit on their own—and failed. But doing so in a structured course environment overseen by professional staff like those of us at Wiki Education gives them the opportunity to share their knowledge with the world—and to have it stick on Wikipedia.

"I've gained appreciation for the potential of programs for bringing people to Wikipedia for the improvement of public knowledge," Ryan says. "It's meaningful not just for oneself to contribute, but also to bring people to Wikipedia."

By working together, the five of us and our colleagues at Wiki Education have been able to create something more than the sum of its parts. The individual efforts the five of us as Wikipedians could have had on Wikipedia's content is far eclipsed by the sixty million words of content that has been added by the program participants we've brought to Wikipedia and supported as they successfully added their voices to the world's largest collaborative project. And the content is more equitable than anything we could've produced as individuals because it brings in diverse voices to the editing community.

Looking Into the Future

So what made us remain Wikipedians? What kept us around? Elysia's observations probably hold true for all of us: "I saw a very clear, urgent, and unmistakable need for someone like me. I am the person who has the skills and knowledge to fix this. I realized: Wikipedia needs me. As a graduate student, I had a faith and belief in my knowledge. I felt like not quite an expert but certainly more qualified than most people to fill in this content gap."

We all saw that we had the skills to make a contribution, we had confidence in our skills, and we saw gaps that, if we didn't fill them, wouldn't get filled. We felt like we were home when we edited Wikipedia. Naturally engaged Wikipedians like us are a rare but vital breed. But to collect the sum of all human knowledge, we need more than just the natural Wikipedians. We need diverse voices to help close content gaps through structured, scalable programs designed to empower one-time contributions.

That's the role organizations like Wiki Education can play in Wikipedia's future. Funded primarily by grants from large foundations, we're able to offer newcomer training programs at scale. By identifying equity gaps, explaining complex policies, and providing friendly faces from the community to our program participants, Wiki Education is tackling Wikipedia's challenges head-on—and succeeding. In 2019, 20 percent of all of English Wikipedia's new active editors came from our program.

As we continue to scale our work, we will continue to have a massive impact on the quality of content, the diversity of contributors, and hopefully in the future the inequities in policies. Large-scale operations to bring new content, new contributors, and new knowledge to Wikipedia—or Wikidata, or whatever the next frontier of open knowledge is—are critically

important for us to achieve that vision we all were initially motivated by: creating the sum of all human knowledge.

“It’s been empowering to say, how can we remove these barriers, how can we make Wikipedia more equitable and diverse?” Elysia says. “I became a wildlife biologist because I wanted to save the world, but I changed fields to Wikipedia because I want to save the world.”

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