

Labor and the New Encyclopedia: Dorothy Howard on Unpaid Knowledge Work. February, 2015. *DIS Magazine*.

The [Encyclopedia 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 a range of editors from slackers and students to researchers and academics. Crowdsourced collaboration and content 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 information comes the necessity for the maintenance, 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 been standardized format of information production. In Wikipedia, hack-a-thons are also called [Edit-a-thons](#), an instructional tech and activism hybrid. Both the hack-a-thon and the Edit-a-thon are designed to educate, 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 these events and to unpaid, crowdsourced projects, more broadly, 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 production of this information. Otherwise, the endeavor risks becoming part of the trend towards high levels of free labor associated with the replacement of jobs through the automation of industrial sectors, a trend now embedded in today’s high-tech [knowledge economy](#).

Harnessing the Collective Intelligence of Volunteers

Like its forbearers in the free and open source software movement, Wikipedia abides by 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 the gift economy. The book [Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything Today](#) is a scary rendition of Wikipedia to the eyes of business executives – offering insights into how to fiscally harness freely contributed and [peer-produced](#) knowledge and data. The fruits of the open-source-driven projects continue to be 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.

While volunteering is perceived as a fairly apolitical way to spend time, conservatives believe that government intervention decreases voluntary activities. The emergence of 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 peer production?

After all, Wikipedia is the most widely-read and authoritative reference in many subject areas. Industry has taken notice and responded in significant ways, commissioning positions for [Wikipedians-in-Residence](#) (fully disclosed, like myself) at institutions, and notably, museums, libraries, and galleries – including The British Museum, The National Institute of Health, and national libraries around the world, among many others.

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.

Wikipedia does pay some contributors, such as developers, administrators, and outreach personnel. The [Wikimedia Foundation](#) keeps its paid staff to a scant number under 300—with most involved in software and engineering, fundraising, and community support. Its volunteer numbers, however, are comprised of around 30,000,000 global users and 118,000 regularly contributing ones. But again, I've observed that if you ask the average Wikipedia contributor if they would take money for their edits (if it were allowed), they generally scoff. And 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 platforms 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 looming 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. Online volunteering involves digital labor invested in blogging, excessive posting and maintenance duties which increase with user activity. Participating in Wikipedia also involves affective work of tolerating conflict of many kinds, online harassment and gender discrimination.

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, hold the position of [Wikipedian-in-Residence](#). I approached 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 and paywalled publishing in its many forms. However, there is a largely unacknowledged but important line between information activism and digital labor that major crowdsourced projects should not ignore.

The web as we know it 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 welfare and social protections like affordable transportation, housing, and other basic needs.

Common understandings of what constitutes volunteering changes over time. And 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.*