Writing African American History Into Wikipedia

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Writing African American History Into Wikipedia

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As the world's largest information database, Wikipedia is a familiar resource for many people. Given the ubiquity of Wikipedia articles on various topics, it has become a first stop for conducting online searches. However, there is a gap of information within Wikipedia related to African American history, and addressing Wikipedia's well-documented racial bias should be a priority for librarians and archivists ("Racial bias on Wikipedia," *2019). In February of 2019, Oregon State University Libraries and Press hosted a Wikipedia Editathon,* "Writing African American History into Wikipedia.*"*

Editathon

The word "editathon" is a combination of the words "edit" and "marathon." It is attributed to Mike Peel and Thomas Dalton, organizers of an editathon at the British Library in 2011 (Snyder, 2018, p. 122). Since then, editathons have been held at various libraries, museums, and archives to highlight their collections. These partnerships between cultural heritage groups and Wikipedia were seen as mutually beneficial, as it brought more awareness about an institution to the public, and also added new, robust information to Wikipedia ("Our Story," n.d.).

Editathons became more well known with the rise of Art + Feminism events. The inaugural Art + Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon was held in 2014 and since then over 500 events have been held worldwide with thousands of people participating ("Our Story," n.d.). Art + Feminism highlighted the gender gaps present in Wikipedia by focusing events on adding information about women, as well as encouraging women to participate in editing. Only 15 percent of Wikipedia editors identify as women (Lih, 2015), consequently, editathons have had the dual purpose of adding new content and diversifying the pool of editors. Along with Art + Feminism, other Wikipedia user groups and nonprofits have sponsored and organized editathons focused on closing gaps within Wikipedia coverage including Wiki Loves Women, AfroCROWD, 500 Women Scientists, and Wiki Loves Pride, just to name a few. We partnered with AfroCROWD for our editathon, for various reasons that we will explain further into the article.

History and Demographics

The site for this case study is Oregon State University, located within the traditional homelands of the Mary's River or Ampinefu Band of Kalapuya. Following the Willamette Valley Treaty of 1855 (Kalapuya etc. Treaty), Kalapuya people were forcibly removed to reservations in Western Oregon ("Termination & Restoration," n.d.).

A predominantly White institution (PWI), OSU is located in Corvallis, Oregon, a town of approximately 59,000 residents. OSU is a public land, space, sea, and sun grant university and nearly a third of all students are enrolled in engineering programs. In the fall of 2018, the student enrollment (headcount) was 30,986 (Oregon State University, 2018). Only 433 students at OSU identified as "Black" (one or more races), for a total of 1.4 percent of the student body. The 2018 census estimates showed that Corvallis had a population of 58,641 and 1.1 percent identified as "Black or African American alone" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

A *Portland Tribune* article stated in 2017, "There's been little effort, until recently, to shed light on black history in Oregon" (Hewitt, 2017). A basic understanding of Oregon's White supremacist history sheds light on the state's low percentage of African Americans

today and also helps explain why online coverage of Pacific Northwest African American history is lacking.

In the 1800s, as White colonizers moved westward across what is now the United States, many of them brought racist ideologies from the eastern part of the country. The Oregon Territory passed its first Black Exclusion Law in 1844, and in 1859 went on to become the only state inducted into the union with racial exclusion laws in its constitution (Hewitt, 2017). As writer and public historian, Walidah Imarisha, stated in a 2014 NPR interview, "Black folks did not come to Oregon because they got the message loud and clear that Oregon did not want them. In many ways, the racial exclusion clause was like a flashing neon sign at the borders that says you're not welcome here" (Lewin, 2014). The chilling effect that the exclusion laws had on migration may be extrapolated by comparing migration numbers between Oregon and California: between 1850 and 1860 the black population in California increased by 4,000, while in Oregon the increase was a mere 75 (Brooks, 2004).

Over the next century various push and pull factors affected black migration into and out of Oregon. For example, many historians believe Oregon had the highest per capita Ku Klux Klan membership in the 1920s, undoubtedly designed to push African Americans out of the state (Lewin, 2014). A large influx of African Americans came to Oregon in the 1930s and 1940s when they were recruited to work in Portland, building ships; during these two decades, the black population in Portland increased by 3000 percent (Brooks, 2004). From the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, another deterrent for all people of color was the presence of an estimated 24 Sundown Towns in Oregon ("The Oregon Black Laws," n.d.). Widespread throughout the U.S., these towns barred black people, and often all people of color, from being in town after sundown. *The Green Book*, a travel guidebook for African Americans published in the mid-1900s, specifically warned travelers to avoid Sundown Towns.

The story continues as gentrification pushes out large numbers of lower-income residents; for example in Portland 10,000 African Americans were pushed out between 2000 and 2010 (Solomon, 2016). Today, the percentage of people who identify as "Black or African Americans alone" in Oregon hovers at about two percent, while nationally the percentage is closer to 13.4 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Planning and Preparation

In the early fall of 2018, we began planning for the Wikipedia Editathon. Two librarians and one archivist, the authors of this article, formed a small team to decide on workflows and individual roles. The team initially discussed various ideas for an editathon theme, but quickly settled on African American history in the Pacific Northwest, which could be incorporated into OSU's annual African American History Month activities in February. In addition, we all felt that Pacific Northwest African American history is not well known, even among residents of the Pacific Northwest, and so we focused on local history. None of the team members identify as African American, which made the first step, establishing partnerships, vitally important.

We began by reaching out to the OSU Office of Diversity and Cultural Engagement, to discuss our plans and get feedback about the proposed event, location, and timing. From here, we were connected with the director of the Black Cultural Center on campus, and received additional input and advice.

Next, we reached out to the Facebook group Wikipedia + Libraries (renamed recently to Wikimedia + Libraries). Members of the Facebook group recommended partnering with AfroCROWD. After we reached out to AfroCROWD, they quickly partnered with us and guided us through much of the process via two scheduled online meetings and numerous emails. They created a Wikipedia:Meetup page for our event, which included detailed information. Everyone who registered also received a reminder the day before the event.

The bulk of preparation activities included identifying pre-existing Wikipedia articles and preparing article stubs. We began by identifying stub or start-class articles in Wikipedia relating to African American history and the Pacific Northwest; a stub is an article that is too short to be considered encyclopedic coverage of a subject and a start-class article is a step above a stub, but still needs considerable work ("Wikipedia," 2019b). Then, through a literature review, we identified people, events, and locations that did not have articles in Wikipedia. We identified 13 possible article topics for the editathon: Susie Revels Cayton (no article), Robin Holmes (no article), 24th Infantry Regiment (start-class article), Beatrice Morrow Cannady (stub article), James D. Saules (no article), Avel Gordy (start-class article), DeNorval Unthank (start-class), Robert E. Lee Folkes (no article), Urban League of Portland (no article), Albina District (no article), Albina Riot of 1967 (no article), Jacob Vanderpool (no article), Lizzie Weeks (no article).

We split the 13 articles between the three team members. Each team member was tasked with gathering information about each article topic, including books, etc. If the topic did not yet have an entry, the team member was tasked with creating a stub article before the event. To view these individual articles go to https://tinyurl.com/y3x3ly72.

The Day of the Editathon

On the day of the event, small "piles of information" about each pre-identified topic were centrally located in the room. Participants were invited to review the topics and take a pile of information back to their workstation. Nearly every participant in our editathon was new to Wikipedia editing, and this material cut down on the barriers to accomplishing the day's mission, which was to "add at least once sentence or other contribution to Wikipedia about a notable person of African descent or a place or cultural item associated with the African Diaspora" ("Wikipedia," 2019a). Two participants chose to create new articles for the editathon, on Roosevelt Credit and Jeremiah Burke Sanderson. And several other participants worked on Wikipedia articles that were not pre-identified.

The editathon took place on Friday, February 8, 2019, from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. in the Valley Library computer classroom. There were 28 participants who added nearly 6,000 words during the event. Music played and there were light refreshments as people entered the room.

Attendees were asked to sign in as they arrived. They were given a slip of paper that included a space for their Wikipedia username—we would later use this to make sure their username appeared on the Wikipedia event dashboard for tracking purposes. The event started with a short presentation that included online training videos on how to start editing Wikipedia provided by AfroCROWD.

The last 30 minutes of the event was spent discussing the edits made by the participants, interesting facts discovered during their research, and their overall experience. Not all editathons dedicate time for a concluding group discussion, but we felt that it was valuable

as it provided a time for participants to bond over their shared experience and learn about the various topics that were added to Wikipedia.

Promotion

The event was promoted, starting one month before the event, through print flyers, designed by a student graphic designer. Other avenues of promotion included social media and faculty listservs. A LibGuide was created, and all promotional materials included a link to the Lib-Guide for more information. We also promoted the event with a short presentation delivered at a monthly OSU Black Student Union meeting at the Black Cultural Center.

Takeaways and Recommendations

This was the first editathon organized at Oregon State University, and as the organizers, we did not know if the campus community would be interested in the event. Surprisingly, attendance at our event exceeded our expectations. The participants were mostly faculty and staff, so for future events, we would like to see more student participants.

Most of the participants stayed until the end of the event and engaged in the post-editing discussion. Interestingly, the majority of the participants were women and subsequently chose to edit topics related to women. As mentioned previously, the demographics of Wikipedia editorship skews heavily male, so we were pleasantly surprised when more women attended the event than men. The event was not advertised specifically towards newcomers, but the majority of our participants did not have a Wikipedia account when they arrived. Because we had so many newcomers, we learned that we should have prepared for difficulties with IP addresses. Only six new usernames can be created on an IP address within a 24-hour period. We reached this limit within the first hour of the event, but were able to circumvent the rule by having participants use their cellphones—using their data, and not the library's WiFi—to create accounts. If you are expecting a lot of first-time editors, encourage them to create an account before the event, or look into requesting a temporary exception to the IP limit.

We did not involve students in the promotion of the editathon. In the future, we will look for ways to involve library student employees early in the process, hire a student intern, and/or reach out and engage with students in the Black Student Union. We are also exploring the possibility of hosting future events at the Black Cultural Center as it might be seen as a more accessible place for students.

We strongly suggest partnering with AfroCROWD or another user group or nonprofit. We attribute much of the success of our first editathon to their leadership, guidance, assistance, and planning. In addition, we recommend promoting the event through department listservs in advance. Over half of our participants were faculty and staff, which we attribute to listserv promotions. One faculty member read about the event on a listserv and contacted us for a meeting beforehand to learn how to incorporate editathon participation into her course design.

Although not part of the original plan, our sister library in Nigeria also decided to host an editathon on the same day, at the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (FU-NAAB). The editathon in Abeokuta was well-attended and involved only librarians from the region and was hosted by Wikimedia Nigeria. We were able to cross-promote our events and strengthen both programs as a result.

Conclusion

Overall, the editathon was successful in training new editors and increasing the diversity of topics in Wikipedia. The information added to Wikipedia has helped provide visibility to people, places, and events that were not well known, but important to Oregon and the greater Pacific Northwest history. We hope to continue our work organizing Wikipedia editathons by adding meaningful information about underrepresented groups, addressing racial bias within Wikipedia, as well as encouraging newcomers to participate and diversify the demographics of Wikipedia editors from the status quo.

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