

Doing the work: Editing Wikipedia as an act of reconciliation

Danielle Robichaud and Krista McCracken
August 28, 2018 in [On Archivy](#)

Wikipedia

Since its establishment in 2001, the English version of Wikipedia[1] has grown to host more than [5.6 million articles](#) that reflect [content ranging from culture and the arts to technology and the applied sciences](#). Consistently ranked as one of the [top visited sites on the Internet](#), Wikipedia provides an open and freely accessible resource of interconnected information that anyone can edit. Unfortunately, not everyone actually does. [Nine out of ten editors are male](#). The [average Wikipediaian](#) is an educated, English-speaking citizen of a majority-Christian nation in the global north. They are technically proficient and likely hold, or are skilled enough to hold, white-collar employment. Not surprisingly, these commonalities have introduced [systemic bias](#) to the manner in which content is generated, updated, and, most critically, omitted from the site.

Pages about trans and cis women, gender non-conforming people, cultural communities in the global south, those living in poverty, and people without internet access are [chronically underrepresented on Wikipedia](#). This includes groups in developing nations, as well as racialized and systemically marginalized groups in economically wealthy countries, such as the Black and Latinx communities in the United States. Equally absent are pages about Indigenous peoples[2], communities, and cultures. As of August 2018 there were 3,468 articles within the [scope of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas WikiProject](#). This number represents only 0.06% of the articles on English-language Wikipedia, with an even smaller percentage relating to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in what is currently known as Canada. Overall, representation of Indigenous-focused content is sorely lacking.

As settlers living and working as archivists on the traditional territories of the [Neutral](#), [Anishnaabeg](#), [Métis](#), and [Haudenosaunee](#) peoples — Danielle on the Haldimand Tract, land extending six miles from each side of the Grand River that was promised to the Six Nations, and Krista on Robinson-Huron Treaty territory — we have personally and professionally considered the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action](#) (TRC) that outline the responsibilities of cultural heritage workers to educate both themselves and the general public about the [Canadian Indian Residential School System](#) (Residential Schools). In working to do so, however, we recognize that Residential Schools were but one of the many horrific consequences of [settler colonialism](#). Meaningful engagement with the reconciliation process and Indigenous communities in Canada means raising awareness about more than

Residential Schools. It means understanding the need for cultural organizations to build [relationships with Indigenous communities rooted in solidarity and allyship](#); centering an ethic that moves [beyond rote territorial acknowledgements](#); and setting aside defensive dismissals of wrongs that happened before we were born in order to prioritize what Senator Murray Sinclair calls “[a sense of responsibility for the future](#).” It also means acknowledging that colonialism continues to impact Indigenous communities and working to break down colonial systems that exist within cultural organizations. We believe that editing Wikipedia through a lens of reconciliation is one way to do so.

In addition to its potential as a professional response to the TRC’s Calls to Action, editing Wikipedia through a lens of reconciliation presents an avenue for increasing the internet’s representation of Indigenous peoples, communities, and cultures in a manner that recognizes the global impacts of settler colonialism. This work has begun with [sharing information about Residential Schools](#), but should evolve into increased representation of Indigenous-focused topics, beyond the scope of trauma and racism, to one that affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples to equality and freedom from discrimination in keeping with the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

There are few examples of literature regarding Wikipedia as a site of reconciliation. Some have explored the potential of diversifying Wikipedia through intentional, targeted editing ([1](#); [2](#); [3](#); [4](#)), and movements such as [Art+Feminism](#) have positioned editing Wikipedia as both a form of activism and as a way to subvert dominant narratives. Much like those who edit to increase the visibility and representation of underrepresented populations, we believe that the purposeful editing of Wikipedia has the power to shift and disrupt narratives that have perpetuated the marginalization of Indigenous peoples, communities, and cultures online.

[Calls for settlers to be actively involved in education and awareness-raising in Canada](#) have been ongoing. Reconciliation cannot happen without both sides participating, and it is unreasonable to expect marginalized communities to teach the basics of racism and the impacts of settler colonial history to those benefiting from their continuation. This means holding ourselves accountable to Indigenous communities by doing the work of educating ourselves and others about not just the realities of Residential Schools, but the broader national and international realities of settler colonialism. Cultural heritage workers with technical training and access to a wealth of information resources are uniquely positioned to use our privileged positions within cultural institutions to [do the work of reconciliation](#), and we see improving Wikipedia’s representation of Indigenous peoples, in and outside of what is currently Canada, as a meaningful and impactful way of doing so.

Unpacking Wikipedia’s notability and neutrality landscape

In order to understand the climate in which representation improvement efforts take place, it is important to first understand the means by which Wikipedia articles are created and evaluated. The site’s [Five Pillars](#) outline that Wikipedia is an encyclopedia rather than a catchall

for any and all information. This principle is enforced through the use of [notability](#) as a check against which pages are nominated for deletion or flagged for revision. To establish and assess the notability of a person, topic, or event, Wikipedia guidelines position [reliable, published sources](#) as the basis for whether or not an article, and the points of view covered within, have a place on the site.

The reliable, published sources viewpoint assumes that a critical mass of verifiable facts within publications of record are free from the bias understood to characterize op-eds or personal blog posts. Wikipedia guidelines advise against a reliance on self-published or opinion-based resources, and on publications generated under questionable editorial oversight. But there is a lack of guidance on navigating the more intangible elements of bias, such as those tied to race, gender, and class, that have historically permeated, and continue to shape, the outputs of publications of record.

In March 2018 Susan Goldberg, editor in chief of *National Geographic* (*NatGeo*), acknowledged that for decades [the magazine's coverage was shaped by racism](#). She characterized the biased coverage as a reflection of the colonial spirit that marked *NatGeo's* founding and noted that acknowledging the publication's racist history was an important step toward talking openly about the racially driven, stereotypical understandings of the world that shape our everyday lives. The admission was followed the same month by an acknowledgement from the *New York Times* (*NYT*) that [its obituaries have historically been dominated by white men](#). In doing so they noted the omission of fifteen women, including mathematician [Ada Lovelace](#), Bollywood actor [Madhubala](#), and investigative journalist [Ida B. Wells](#), as the basis for a new feature titled [Overlooked](#) that aims to retroactively address historical omissions. While these omissions are impossible to definitively explain in black and white terms, they resonate with far too much editorial grey to ignore asking [whose lives have and have not been deemed newsworthy](#).

Though it remains to be seen how the acknowledgement of systemic bias by publications of record will shape future media coverage, what is certain is that omissions, otherings, and the centering of Whiteness within their pages has and will continue to influence the assessment and establishment of notability on Wikipedia. Over time, the nature and quality of Wikipedia content has been undeniably susceptible to the type of bias noted by *NatGeo* and the *NYT*, and one can safely assume that it has manifested, in part, as the personal interests of Wikipedia's predominantly male editors.

As noted above, while anyone can edit Wikipedia, few of us actually do. A 2012 report by Wikipedia's governing body, the Wikimedia Foundation, revealed that the site relies heavily on a [male-dominated pool of editors](#). The absence of meaningful representation, perpetuated by the narrow focus of a homogeneous editor pool, is exacerbated by the admitted legacy of (intentional) omission in publications of record. Efforts to grow Wikipedia pages about chronically underrepresented groups and topics are therefore stymied by a shortage of the secondary resources required to meet notability guidelines rooted in a Western, colonial

framework where neutrality is understood to be achievable. As a result, editors seeking to diversify Wikipedia are effectively expected to do so with the odds stacked against them. As [Sara Boboltz explains](#), “..there’s simply less documentation on many accomplished women and minorities throughout history — they were often ignored, after all, or forced to make their contributions as someone else’s assistant.”

Editing as Reconciliation

In [2013 Chelsea Vowel argued](#) that “what we all learn about Canadian history is wrong. Every single one of us, native and non-native alike, have been fed a series of lies, half-truths and fantasies intended to create a cohesive national identity.” Sweeping and well-loved national narratives paint Canada as an equality-focused, peaceful country. These narratives ignore the ongoing impact of historical and contemporary settler colonialism and negate the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples. We need to consider what stories we privilege when we talk about Canadian history, and to (re)consider how Indigenous voices are represented in history, in the media, and on the internet.

Archives, for example, have complex colonial relationships with Indigenous communities. For years, history was recorded from settler perspectives, Indigenous material culture was actively stolen from communities, and access to materials written about or by Indigenous peoples was denied to the very communities they originated from. The history of Residential Schools, the [Sixties Scoop](#), and ongoing systems of settler colonialism are well documented. There are also present-day colonial relationships, power structures, and physical access barriers that prevent Indigenous communities from accessing the pieces of their own histories that are held by archives. As [Crystal Fraser and Zoe Todd have noted](#), “To reclaim, reshape, and transform the archives to meet the needs of Indigenous peoples requires an honest and blunt engagement with the bureaucratic and arcane structures that govern and shape research today.” Cultural heritage and archival professionals need to think beyond traditional modes of description and access to information, and listen to the desires of Indigenous communities.

The final report of the TRC identified healing, reconciliation, and restoring the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians as a critical priority. Moreover, the Commission called on Canada’s museums and archives to work with Indigenous peoples to better present their cultures and histories, including histories of assimilation, cultural loss, and reclamation. Parts of the archival profession have [demonstrated a reluctance](#) to critically engage with the colonial practices that continue to marginalize Indigenous communities within the archival record, and with the continued barriers many face in simply accessing archives. The archival system needs to change in order to respond to the needs of marginalized communities. Systematic change is slow but archivists and other cultural heritage professionals in libraries, museums, and galleries are well-positioned to: navigate the cultural heritage institutions that hold information about Indigenous communities; conduct secondary source research on colonial systems; and help educate the public.

Wikipedia prioritizes concise, well-balanced summaries of topics. This has the potential to open the door for clear, evidence-based summaries of difficult topics such as Residential Schools, [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women](#), intergenerational trauma, the Sixties Scoop, settler colonialism, and a number of other topics. The value of reliable and accurate Wikipedia coverage was a driving force in [Rachel Wexelbaum, Katie Herzog, and Lane Rasberry's Queering Wikipedia effort](#). They searched Google for each of the terms that make up LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning) and found that only Wikipedia provided a definition with links to relevant informational pages. In turn, the other high-ranking findings pointed people to advertisements for pornographic videos. Although their testing scenario was undertaken in 2012, Sofiya Noble's 2018 book [Algorithms of Oppression: How search engines reinforce racism](#) underscores that not much has changed. The entrenched and pervasive nature of racist, sexist, and stereotypical information readily available to those with internet access persists, with little being done to counter it.

Having well researched, clearly written pages about difficult subjects and underrepresented communities matters. For some, Wikipedia might be the only thing they ever read about a given topic and, in the case of Indigenous representation, having a well-referenced page that does not repeat [worn settler colonial tropes](#) is a step toward increasing awareness of ongoing racism within Canada and other countries.

Editing Considerations

Conceiving how to improve the representation of Indigenous peoples, communities, and cultures presents a number of challenges, including how to fit Indigenous knowledges within the bounds of Wikipedia. Wikipedia uses Eurocentric systems of categorization, notability, and reference to measure the quality of pages. For example, Wikipedia does not consider oral history a reliable source, and page templates are designed to present information in linear ways, which can clash with holistic ways of knowing. These structural challenges can present barriers to Indigenous editors and those looking to increase Indigenous representation within Wikipedia articles and citations. [Maja van der Velden has argued that](#) "Wikipedia's design does not allow for Indigenous communities to use Indigenous concepts and structures to tell a story and to present and organize knowledge. At the same time, articles about Indigenous knowledge, artifacts, and peoples are categorized in a manner that fragments Indigenous knowledge and makes it invisible as a body of regular, rational, and systematic knowledge."

The structures of Wikipedia have at times further marginalized Indigenous voices. When Indigenous knowledges are republished in traditional academic sources it is often viewed as 'legitimized,' which ignores the impact of a Western lens on the information and removes that knowledge from its community roots. Wikipedia's notability and citation requirements reinforce Western worldviews and have the potential to further marginalize Indigenous perspectives. This point is clearly articulated by Peter Gallert and Maja van der Velden in their work ["The Sum of All Human Knowledge? Wikipedia and Indigenous Knowledge."](#) The authors maintain that "the systemic bias in the interpretation and use of Wikipedia's pillars, policies,

and guidelines results in an understanding of human knowledge that excludes the knowledge of non-Western cultural communities and in particular the knowledge of Indigenous communities.” (p. 130). The citing of Indigenous scholars and Indigenous media outlets on Wikipedia can help mitigate this erasure and reposition Indigenous communities as the experts of their own culture and history.

It is crucial to note that there is a fine line between doing educational work and potentially [appropriating](#) Indigenous voices for the benefit of Western society. The history of Indigenous peoples, in Canada and abroad, has long been told from a settler perspective, and as a society we are still coming to grips with how to overcome that colonial practice. In the context of Wikipedia, how do editors negotiate the line between settlers (still) being the authors of a colonized peoples’ history and expecting Indigenous peoples to shoulder the burden of educating settlers on uncomfortable topics? More importantly, do Indigenous people want their history, lives, and communities represented on Wikipedia?

Framing Wikipedia editing within the context of the [First Nations Principles of OCAP](#) (ownership, control, access, and possession) can help editors examine the ethical implications of sharing Indigenous content online. In the case of archives, OCAP has very explicit implications around access and control of information relating to Indigenous lives and communities. Simply because something is in the public domain does not mean it is ethically okay to share it — Indigenous communities should have the final say about how their own heritage and culture is shared. Not all Indigenous knowledges are meant for the general public. Practically, this means working to foster better relationships with Indigenous communities, listening to their needs, and being open to criticism. “Doing the work” requires reflection, intention, and critical reflection that cultural heritage workers editing Wikipedia should not shy away from.

What can you do right now?

While we have focused on the importance of ensuring that Wikipedia content reflects the realities of settler colonialism as a way of engaging with the reconciliation process, we want to emphasize that creating and improving pages about Indigenous peoples, communities, and cultures, in their own right, is an equally essential part of the reconciliation process.

Further, although navigating the intricacies of representing Indigenous peoples online in a non-culturally-appropriative and responsible way is a long-term effort that must center community wishes and protocols, there are a number of practical ways to contribute to Wikipedia *right now*. Although these efforts don’t replace the need to directly engage with and support Indigenous communities, they are one way to alleviate the persistent burden on Indigenous peoples to educate settlers about their shared history.

The examples that follow represent achievable, reconciliation-oriented edits that address the omissions and the otherings of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and abroad, that have been

allowed to flourish in the historical record. You don't need to create completely new pages to instigate meaningful change; text revisions and expansion, reference work, or skills-building are an equally valuable part of doing the work.

1. **Language matters.** Revise all mentions and variants of "Canada's Indigenous people" to more accurately read "Indigenous peoples in Canada" or, better still, "Indigenous peoples in what is now Canada." Indigenous peoples don't belong to Canada and many don't claim or observe Canadian citizenship. Another option is to start making note of instances where "Canadian" or "of Indigenous ancestry" are used to qualify a person's heritage and, where appropriate, make direct reference to relevant national or community affiliations. It takes no more than a minute to make these types of changes and you can be the one to do it. For more information see the Journalists for Human Rights' [Style Guide For Reporting on Indigenous Peoples](#).
2. **Learn about the land.** Visit pages relevant to the geography of your daily life, such as those about your city, neighborhood, place of work, alma mater, or the areas where your family owns real estate. Do the pages mention the traditional land on which those places are situated? Do they acknowledge which treaties govern the use of the land? Or is the land altogether [unceded](#)? You're in a position to introduce or improve information about each of these scenarios. Learn more about traditional land and treaties via the [Native Land map](#) or [Whose Land](#).
3. **Patriotism is more than celebrating Canada Day.** Descendants of European settlers have a tendency to claim their (multi-generational) heritage, but not the colonial implications of that same ancestry. Visit pages that reflect your settler ancestry and learn more about how your ancestors came to live in Canada. How did they arrive? [Did they benefit from government policies that privileged European immigrants through the appropriation of 'native land'](#)? Is there any mention of mutually beneficial relationship-building between settlers and Indigenous peoples in the area? Do the pages mention the active displacement or [enfranchisement](#) of Indigenous nations to ensure the survival of settler communities? Do mentions of Indigenous peoples perpetuate stereotypes about primitive or barbaric cultures? These are heavy and potentially uncomfortable questions, but each one represents an opportunity to read, reflect, and share what you learn with others.
4. **Pass on what you've learned.** One of the best ways to ensure you've grasped a new idea is to share it with someone else. When you read an article or book about Indigenous peoples, cultures, or histories, visit the corresponding Wikipedia page(s) and identify areas for improvement. What information is missing? Where does the narrative become hard to follow? Can you replace or update broken links? What pages were you expecting to find but were surprised didn't exist? And, most importantly, are you in a position to help fill that absence by creating a page, adding a new sub-section, or improving the references available for further reading?

5. **Improvements to Wikipedia aren't limited to writing.** If original written contributions aren't your thing, you can still make meaningful contributions to Wikipedia. Do you like taking photos? Ever wondered why some pages have photos and others don't? Learning about how and when to [upload photos](#) is a good place to start. Interested in the relationship between [open data and library catalogues](#)? Consider exploring [Wikidata](#). Do you like copyediting? Have you worked as a writing coach? Check out Wikipedia's [peer review](#) requests. Other avenues for participation include [maintenance tasks](#), such as [de-orphaning pages](#), that keep Wikipedia functioning in a predictable, understandable way.
6. **Get other people on board.** Although Wikipedia has introduced a number of usability improvements to facilitate editing, the truth is that the learning curve can be steep. If you have experience editing or are in a position to provide workspace to the general public, consider hosting or attending an edit-a-thon to help out first-time editors or to learn from more experienced contributors. For hosts these events are an opportunity to [build relationships and support technological skills development](#), as well as an avenue for improving the coverage of underrepresented groups through an [outreach and activism lens](#). If participating in person seems daunting, don't forget about remote participation. Most edit-a-thons have project pages that outline areas for improvement and useful resources for doing the work.

The [cultural genocide perpetrated by Residential Schools](#) actively disrupted and prevented the intergenerational transmission of languages, knowledges, and customs between Indigenous nations, communities, and families. An indisputable offshoot of that practice was keeping settler Canadians ignorant about the rich, dynamic, and very much alive cultures of those peoples. This practice has included ignoring and downplaying the presence of Indigenous figures, in the teaching of Canadian history. Working to fully represent and raise awareness about the spectrum of Indigenous heritage — past, present, and future — is an essential part of the TRC's Calls to Action regarding the education of settler Canadians.

[1] As of August 2018 Wikipedia is available in [301 different languages](#). For the purpose of this paper, the English version of the site will be discussed.

[2] In this instance, Indigenous has been used to refer to peoples whose ancestors pre-date settler colonization the world over. Recognizing that Indigenous peoples have diverse histories, cultures, and identities, we acknowledge that Indigenous is an imperfect catch-all term that will be limited to only those instances where generalities are appropriate.

The authors wish to thank Desmond Wong, Skylee-Storm Hogan, and Allana Mayer for their input and support during the writing of this article.

