Enlisting "vertues noble & excelent": Behavior, credit, and knowledge organization in the social edition

Constance Crompton, Raymond Siemens, Alyssa Arbuckle, & Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE)

2015

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This article was originally published at:
http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/9/2/000202/000202.html

Citation for this paper:
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Abstract

A part of the special issue of DHQ on feminisms and digital humanities, this paper takes up as its starting place Greg Cran
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Drawing on the scholarship about the culture of the Wikimedia suite of projects, the gendered trolling experienced by members of our team in the production of the Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript in Wikibooks (see figure 1) [Siemens et al. 2012a], and interviews with our advisory group: Wikibooks proved a challenging environment for edition production for both cultural and technological reasons, reasons which might prove scholars to dispense with the platform. The collaborative space opened up by social media while not inherently feminist, and indeed often openly hostile to women is, however, one of the central online spaces where the public turns for information. The Wikimedia suite of projects are so important to the contemporary circulation of knowledge, that the key to feminist scholars is to encourage gender equity in social behavior, credit sharing, and knowledge organization in Wikimedia, rather than abandon the Wikimedia suite of projects in favour of more controlled collaborative environments.

Introduction

It does not require a particularly savvy reader to parse Richard Hatfield’s intent to insult “all women” in “All women have ver
tues noble & excelent” (18v of the

DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly

2015

Volume 9 Issue 2

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Despite Stephen Nichol’s call to “dismantle the silo model of digital scholarship” [Nichol 2009], many electronic scholars edit, as print editors, continue to exist as self-contained units that do not encourage interaction with other resources. 

Furthermore, many editors do not actively encourage or facilitate interaction among the communities of practice they serve, or even among those who have the most knowledge to bring to bear on the edition [Hine 2010]. 
The scholarly community is now producing tools for crowdsourced transcription and annotation, but the community of users that has developed around the Wikimedia suite of projects has anticipated (and, we speculate, inspired) the development of these tools. 

Acknowledging the dedicated community already engaged in Wikibooks, we sought to draw on Wikibooks’ accessibility for editors, scholars, and students. As we investigated and participated in Wikimedia’s community, we experienced what research has already suggested: Wikipedia is a non-profit foundation, most famous for Wikipedia. The foundation itself is very small — it has 117 employees (up from 20 in 2010) [Wikipedia Foundation, foundation for the management, fundraising and technological development. The content of the projects is contributed and moderated by volunteer editors. In order for Wikibooks projects, including Wikipedia, Wikibooks, and Wikisource, to be feminist, they need not only address issues of import to women (although Wikibooks’s death of information traditionally of interest to women is indeed a feminist issue), but also need to address how behavior and credit in online space create the structure, design, and content of projects and pages within Wikipedia.

Although the social edition project predates the Wikipedia edit-a-thons of 2012 and 2013, the project editorial team endorses the #TooFew and #DHPoco editing drives. As Adeline Koh has pointed out, since the average Wikipedia editor “is a college-

Figure 1. The Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript: state of contents.

Since Wikipedia and Wikibooks are often a first, and occasionally only, stop for many members of the public when searching for information, it is incumbent upon scholars, as members of a specialist community often supported by public funds, to engage with the platform. 

In building an edition on the principles of open access and editorial transparency, we have integrated scholarly content into the environments maintained by the editorial communities already existent in the Wikimedia suite of projects, including Wikipedia, Wikibooks, and Wikisource. In an experimental spirit, we established the editorial conversation into multiple pre-existing social media platforms, including blog posts, Wikibooks discussion pages, dedicated Renaissance and early modern online community space; Skype-enabled interviews with our advisory group; and Twitter. In this paper, we will introduce the Devonshire Manuscript itself and offer a brief overview of the steps that led up to its Wikibook instantiation of the manuscript. 

Drawing on Jacqueline Hine’s argument that intellectual content is not the only index of a feminist digital resource [Hine 2010], we argue that there need not be a text by or about women at the center of a publicly edited edition in order for that edition to be feminist. A social edition’s success as a feminist text in the wiki environment may be measured by how it manages to short circuit personal sexist attacks in the online space of the edition, avoid latent sexism in the structure of information, and resist the deletion of content that is either produced by women or culturally coded as feminine. We conclude by suggesting a method of receiving credit for Wikimedia contributions, which would attract editors who otherwise might be too overloaded in the office to be able to contribute without getting credited. If widely adopted this method would lead to a more diverse group of editors with the skills and Wikimedia editorial credibility to respond to instances of inter-editor trolling and sexism in the structure of information. By encouraging the ongoing conversation between and across online communities rather than demanding the diminution of gendered markers online, the social edition process sheds light on how digital humanities might leverage existing online platforms to meet broadly feminist goals.

Feminism is understood here as the organized effort to undermine patriarchy, the system in which men, women, and institutions engage in the persistent valuation of things culturally coded as masculine and make over things considered to be feminine and female. The burgeoning of sites that store user-generated content has fostered feminist intervention, since “Web 2.0 culture, while clearly not as exclusionary or hostile as the earlier mainframe and hacking cultures, remains at its ideological core, a masculinized culture” [Bury 2010, 235]. A key mechanism through which activism in the online space of the edition comes from its ability to short circuit personal sexist attacks in the online space of the edition, avoid latent sexism in the structure of information, and resist the deletion of content that is either produced by women or culturally coded as feminine. We conclude by suggesting a method of receiving credit for Wikimedia contributions, which would attract editors who otherwise might be too overloaded in the office to be able to contribute without getting credited. If widely adopted this method would lead to a more diverse group of editors with the skills and Wikimedia editorial credibility to respond to instances of inter-editor trolling and sexism in the structure of information. By encouraging the ongoing conversation between and across online communities rather than demanding the diminution of gendered markers online, the social edition process sheds light on how digital humanities might leverage existing online platforms to meet broadly feminist goals.

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Shifting the power away from a single editor is not an inherently feminist act. Concaruing of this shift, however, leads us to speculate on what a feminist method might look like in an open-access Web 2.0 environment. The gendered version of the aphorism that “on the Internet no one knows you are a dog” [Chow-White 2012, 7] “on the Internet no one knows you are a woman” suggests that it might be possible to avoid sexist trolling and biased deletion of Wikimedia content by concealing markers of feminity from men. However, whether Wikimedia editors on the grounds that they are women (the very definition of prejudices: hostility, distrust, or violence against an individual based on his or her belonging to a group) often takes the form of trolling, a form of transgression, of the Internet in the creation of a hostile environment can undermine an easy response. The feminist organization of knowledge, attendance to the ways women are represented at the level of code, and dismantling the sexist barriers that that representation may erect, can undermine the valuation of things culturally coded as masculine and make over things considered to be feminine and female.

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content. Any collaboratively produced edition's equity work originates in affordances of the editorial platform, the structure of information, and the behaviour of collaborators. A DMSEG advisor commented, "Wikibook's edition of the Devonshire Manuscript has been produced by just such a team. The Devonshire Manuscript Editorial Group (or DMSEG) [6], made up of a core team of researchers at the Electronic Text Cultural Library (ETCL) and the University of Victoria, and distributed network of scholars, postdoctoral fellows, graduate researchers, and programmers, working with two publishers [7], an editorial board [5], and self-selected members of the public) is motivated by a desire to extend research as our end goal; we produced an edition in Wikibooks that is scholarly in a traditional sense but also enables scholars to contribute, access, and annotate manuscript. Wikibooks archives each change to the book, allowing us to track revisions and revisions to the text. Furthermore, under the hood of Wikibooks projects is a network of editor’s role pages, talk pages, and edit reports which allow for the specific self-description of an editor’s own, or via social cases, the inherent purpose."

"As with print facsimile editions, the accurate transcription of the source is at the heart of the social edition. The transcription of the manuscript in its entirety, moving beyond the limitations of an author-centered focus on Wyatt’s contributions in isolation, to concentrate on the social, literary, and historical context to situate the volume as a unified whole."

The advisory group noted the particular way that the Devonshire Manuscript itself is a true miscellany: including all creative textual works — complete poems, verse fragments and excerpts from longer works, anagrams, and other ephemeral jottings — the manuscript consists of 194 items. It is the work of “educated amateurs,” a coterie that included members of Anne Boleyn’s entourage. Margaret Douglas, Thomas Howard, and Mary Shelton entered the majority of the original work in the manuscript. Of the identified hands, Mary Sholtoz’s, who lived in France, and two hands that worked in the early 1540s, have a more florid style, while the other hands are more straightforward, less ornate and more utilitarian.

Generally, the Devonshire Manuscript’s structure and content, rather than the culture of Wikibooks projects informed our choice of Wikibooks as the venue for initial publication. Although the manuscript has attracted scholarly attention as an artifact of the first sustained multi-gendered writing community in English, at the time of writing there had been no authoritative critical editions of the Devonshire Manuscript [10]. The manuscript has, however, served as a source for Thomas Wyatt’s poetry. His verses have been published and annotated by H. G. Keen (1915), Kenneth Muir (1947, 1948, 1985), and Patricia Thomson (1983) in their respective editions of Wyatt’s poetry, but with little attention to the manuscript itself. That said, documents of women’s writing in the Tudor court are of interest to women. Our experience in Wikibooks confirms this: in the final section we will discuss the treatment of one of our female editors’ experience with an online aggressor (a “troll”).

"Characterized by Nicola Shulman as “the Facebook of the Tudor court” [Shulman 2011, 142], the Devonshire Manuscript is much more than an important witness in the Wyatt canon: the manuscript is also, in Colin Burnham’s estimation, “the richest surviving record of early Tudor poetry and the literary activity of 16th century women” [Burnham 2009, 3]. Throughout this process, we remained mindful of Marietta’s assertion that ‘literary production, reproduction, and reception are all socially mediated, the resulting texts demand attention in their own right and not just as illegitimate or illegitimate variants from authorial archetypes’ [Marietta 1993, 212]. The Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript demands attention of the manuscript’s textual and physical properties in a manner that foregrounds the author’s role in the production of the manuscript itself. As we noted above, the hitherto unpublished manuscript is the first example of men and women writing together in English."
value of sexual difference or simply erase evidence of women's participation? In the final analysis the information organized for the human reader announces the value of women's participation in the production of the original manuscript, but does not list the particular reader algorithmically determined, for example, how many items in the manuscript were entered by women, although it does list that reader, named with an algorithm (T), for example, all the poems entered in Mary Shelley's hand, and, furthermore, which of those poems are her original creation. Another layer of encoding could be added to make the sex of the Devonshire Manuscript accessible in Wikibooks, but it is not clear that focusing on the sex of the contributors, whether they be historical or contemporary, is a central, or even relevant criterion of a feminist editorial methodology in Wikibooks.

Feminist social edition building does not rely solely on thoughtful encoding of sex and gender; it relies on the behavior of contributors, readers, and critics in and around the edition. It is this behavior, rather than simply the publication of material by female compilers, that makes an edition a feminist work. The formation of the social edition's advisory group, in particular, provided a unique opportunity to invite potential critics to shape the product and the products of the edition, and a means for feminist scholars to have the final say in the editorial policy. It is this edition to some extent that guides us, short or long term, in the construction of digital editions.

At worst, we expected a clash of interpretation between the advisors and the public.3 What transpired was not a clash, however, but rather an instance of trolling that is in keeping with reports of the sexism and drive-by trolling of open Web resources and discourse forums. In light of our experience of the feminine production of the social edition, we argue for the importance of incorporating various social venues and platforms that enable conversation across previously divergent lines of knowledge production in order to mitigate the trolling that tends to repel female contributors, thus diminishing the likelihood that those resources will contain quality information of interest to women and feminine people.

The advisory group was unanimous in their assertion that the Wikibooks platform challenges our traditional means of assessing an editor's authority while facilitating the type of conversation that peer review is meant to embody. An advisor remarked, "The main advantage of an online edition is the openness to feedback and improvements — not of the introduction, the texts, and the testimony — but of the advisors themselves, however interested the group, no matter how well-informed or well-intentioned they want to be." As an advisor asserted, "there are very few people qualified to read the manuscript and say everything "I would want to read"." This comment points to the divide between some academics and the public; the scholarly community has produced authoritative editions and other resources, such as the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and Oxford English Dictionary; however, the cost of accessing those authoritative resources has pushed members of the public to platforms that let them share and circulate knowledge for free. The context in Wikibooks platforms only costs time to compose and consume. The divide between two spheres, academic and public, who make and share knowledge within their own sphere, but who do not collaborate with one another in Wikimedia, is wide. Furthermore, both groups may not act in ways that support equity. The key is to push back against the definition of qualification, as we will see, in both communities to find where institutional prejudice may adhere from the offline world. Within the scope of our study scholars did not stop or even comment on issues of trolling because they did not feel the need to have the expertise and wiki credibility that it takes to be a wiki editor. Feminist scholars would be empowered to contribute to Wikibooks projects by receiving credit for that work. If scholars did contribute they would be less likely to dismiss Wikimedian projects, however, as it stands report of trolling and issues of credit like the ones listed here, might simply prevent scholars from contributing to Wikimedia projects. Indeed, female scholars are subjected to the same brevity of free time that is endemic for most women outside of academia, as long as scholars do not get credit for Wikimedia work and have to do it outside of their regular work in the knowledge sector, the less likely we are to close the credibility gaps that exist between Wikimedians' editorial skill and scholar's faith in Wikimedia projects' authority and accuracy.

The ETCL-based DMSEG’s use of Twitter to find out who might be interested in joining the editorial venture was more fraught. We furthered our social media interactions via Twitter, where twice weekly we tweeted out poems from the Devonshire Manuscript Wikibook10. We received feedback from the student support of Tudor avatars to the more critical responses of academics. To our surprise, we found a thriving community of Henriican editors on Twitter, including members of the public to tweet as Anne Boleyn, Thomas Wyatt, Mary Shelley, and Margaret Douglas. We thought that they might be interested in reading and contributing to the Wikibooks edition. It turned out, however, that the people behind the avatars were more interested in the roleplay and social interaction thatTwitter makes possible than they were in editing. The Wikibooks edition, via the Devonshire Manuscript Twitter account was invited to join Twitter pornas in which the Henrician avatars met at an appointed time to tweet to one another. In this case the affordances of Twitter were to our advantage. The Wikibook edition would not necessarily have been a place that supported roleplay and socializing, but Twitter offered a space for that type of interaction, allowing the Wikibook comments thread and talk pages free of the preference of people professing to be the original contributors to the Devonshire Manuscript. We received more constructive feedback from scholars. Where Lady Madge Shelton — a Tudor avatar of Devonshire Manuscript contributor Mary Shelton — may write "[devonshire_MS You know you have my heart, love. Thou art my life’s ambition. Xoxo @FOLLOW@FOLLOW [Shelton 2012], more helpful questions were raised with tweets like Andy Fleck’s question, "Quizzing Wyatt. In what context?" [Fleck 2012], or William Boyle’s comment on regional dialect [Boyle 2013], or Chris Shalley’s curiosity about technical and legal matters: "By the way, would be very interested in the IP issues involved in publishing the edition online. Any notes?" [Shalley 2012] (see figure 2).

Perhaps predictably, academic and Wikipedia culture do not easily align. In the current academic environment, job promotion and security rely on tangible records of service. The inability to receive credit for editing in Wikibooks may deter even the most interested feminist scholars from contributing to Wikimedia projects. As one advisor noted, perhaps some day, probably in the next generation, people...
We propose a tiered solution: for the time being, women ought not feel pressure to reveal their sex online, ought to be provided with mechanisms for course, many women who edit in the Wikimedia suite of projects who do not identify their sex. Non-identification might initially seem like the solution: if women do not disclose their sex, they will be assumed to be male, and will benefit from the heritage where it will be seen, taken up, and expanded by both academic and citizen scholars, in ways that increased the content culturally coded as of interest to women and feminine people.

Although discussions in Wikibooks are occasionally fractious, the Wikibooks community remains dedicated to the site's integrity: within a day of the attack on our team member, Jomegat had deleted the offending user’s Wikibooks account (although further investigation has shown that this user is a recurring menace in Wikibooks).

The Magic Circle also lets Wiki editors point to the work that they do to help moderate the tone of the Wikibooks editorial discussion and who make the subtle changes that cumulatively fight institutional sexism in the organization of information. Addressing issues of credit alone is not enough to move the Wikimedia suite a feminist editorial space. Social and racial trolling are persistent problems in the Wikimedia suite of projects, to which the members of the DMSEG were as susceptible as other editors. For example, in December 2011, one of the ETCL team members, editing under the user name Culturelle, was subject to abusive abuse on her personal discussion page. This trolling user, Tyronne Jones, made sexist comments against the member of our team, with an aggressive and racist tone, on both her page and on others’ talk pages. Nevertheless, although discussions in Wikibooks are occasionally fractious, the Wikibooks community remains dedicated to the site’s integrity: within a day of the attack on our team member, Jomegat had deleted the offending user’s Wikibooks account (although further investigation has shown that this user is a recurring menace in Wikibooks).

Like a private wiki community, Wikibooks has its own social conventions, which may be at odds with the behavior that would encourage behavior culturally coded as feminine. As one advisor stated, in a wiki you don’t necessarily want to go in and poke without permission on somebody’s entry proper. You want to actually be able to work through it in the Talk section, and then from there ... you introduce yourself into the environment, you offer suggestions, you point out where things may or may not gel with what you think ... from that point you engage with the actual editing on the page.

As previously noted, Shyong Lam has identified both the systemic sexism leveled against Wikimedia contributors who identify themselves as women and the community’s ambivalence about topics that are culturally coded as feminine. There are, of course, many women who edit in the Wikimedia suite of projects who do not identify their sex. Non-identification might initially seem like the solution: if women do not disclose their sex, they will be assumed to be male, and will benefit from the heritage where it will be seen, taken up, and expanded by both academic and citizen scholars, in ways that increased the content culturally coded as of interest to women and feminine people.

We started the Wikibook initiative driven by curiosity about the new knowledge communities that have sprung up around social media, with the expectation that a process-driven approach could keep feminist methods at the fore. Process is key, and we certainly had to refine ours to meet multiple communities’ needs. Our short-term goal was to spark conversation around the Devonshire Manuscript, but our long-term goal is to work toward a model for preserving and disseminating our cultural heritage where it will be seen, taken up, and expanded by both academic and citizen scholars, in ways that increased the content culturally coded as of interest to women and feminine people.

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The poetics all women have vertuous noble & excellent comes from a collaborative, evolving production space that allowed for various interpretations and amendments to authoritative text, and we must reflect this process in our contemporary modes of knowledge conveyance and edition building. Issues of authority, credit, or technological threshold are the only reasons scholars resist contributing to Wikimania projects. While it was easy to ensure civility (if not outright concern for gender equity) in the social space, it was very challenging to confront the systemic and direct sexism in Wikibooks. The wiki format itself does not discourage gender equity per se — we interpret our experience of sexism in Wikibooks as a reflection of the systemic and direct sexism in Wikibooks. The wiki format itself does not discourage gender equity per se — we interpret our experience of sexism in Wikibooks as a reflection of the systemic and direct sexism in Wikibooks. The wiki format itself does not discourage gender equity per se — we interpret our experience of sexism in Wikibooks as a reflection of the systemic and direct sexism in Wikibooks. The wiki format itself does not discourage gender equity per se — we interpret our experience of sexism in Wikibooks as a reflection of the systemic and direct sexism in Wikibooks.
As one advisor warned, "You'll have people telling you, for example, the Earl of Oxford wrote all these poems... And the others will say, 'no, it was Bacon,' and still others will say, 'no, Christopher Marlowe was alive then and he wrote them.'"}

Elizabeth Heale's edition, According to Lam, who was using data from 2008, 11.8% of People and Arts contributors are self-identified women [Lam et al. 2011].

Robert E. Bjork (Director, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies; Arizona State University), William S. Hill, Jonathan Gibson (Queen Mary University of London), John Lassnig (King's College London), and Katherine Rowe (Brown University).

DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly: Enlisting Virtues Noble & Excellent... http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/9/2/000202/000202.html

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