Enlisting "Vertues Noble & Excelent": Behavior, Credit, and Knowledge Organization in the Social Edition

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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:
Enlisting “Vertues Noble & Excellent”: Behavior, Credit, and Knowledge Organization in the Social Edition

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Abstract

A part of the special issue of DHQ on feminisms and digital humanities, this paper takes as its starting place Greg Crane’s exhortation that there is a “need to shift from lone editorials and monumental editions to editors ... who coordinate contributions from many sources and oversee living editions.” In response to Crane, the exploration of the “living edition” detailed here examines the process of creating a publicly editable edition and considers what that edition, the process by which it was built, and the platform in which it was produced means for editions that support and promote gender equity. Drawing on the scholarship about the culture of the Wikimedia suite of projects, and the gendered trolling experienced by members of our team in the production of the Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript in Wikibooks, and interviews with our advisory group, we argue that while the Wikimedia projects are often openly hostile online spaces, the Wikimedia suite of projects are so important to the contemporary circulation of knowledge, that the key is to encourage gender equity in social behavior, credit sharing, and knowledge organization in Wikimdia, rather than abandon it for a more controlled collaborative environment for edition production and dissemination.

Introduction

It does not require a particularly savvy reader to parse Richard Harrifield’s intent to insult “all women” in “All women have vertues noble & excelent” (18v of the Devonshire Manuscript, Baron 1994, 335). The metrical place praise women for their fidelity, while the new lines suggested by virgules damn all women, imagining each woman’s sole virtue as her ability to please her husband, a virtue which none possesses. It is a commonplace that this sort of easy dismissal, or indeed outright hostility towards women, often guised as humor, is still endemic to online social spaces, such as the Wikimedia foundation's suite of projects. This paper takes as its starting place Greg Crane’s exhortation that there is a “need to shift from lone editorials and monumental editions to editors ... who coordinate contributions from many sources and oversee living editions” [Crane 2019]. In response to Crane, the exploration of the “living edition” detailed here examines the process of creating a publicly editable edition and considers what that edition, the process by which it was built, and the platform in which it was produced means for the production of editions that support and promote gender equity. Our study draws 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. 2012][1], and interviews with our advisory group. Wikibooks proved a challenging environment for edition production for both cultural and technological reasons, reasons which might incline scholars to disperse 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 for feminist scholars is to encourage gender equity in social behavior, credit sharing, and knowledge organization in Wikimdia, rather than abandon the Wikimedia suite of projects in favour of more controlled collaborative environments for edition production and dissemination.

Despite Stephen Nichols’ call to “dismantle the silo model of digital scholarship” [Nichols 2009], many electronic scholarly editions, like print editions, continue to exist as self-contained units that do not encourage interaction with other resources. Furthermore, many editions 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.[2] 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 discover Wikibooks’ affordances for editors, scholars, and students. As we investigated and participated in Wikimedia’s community, we experienced what research has already suggested: Wikimedia, the go-to resource for many when seeking information, is a disturbingly gendered space.

Wikimedia is a non-profit foundation, most famous for Wikipedia. The foundation itself is very small — it has 117 employees (up from 26 in 2010) (Wikimedia Foundation), responsible for the foundation’s management, fundraising and technological development. The content of the projects is contributed and moderated by volunteer editors. In order for Wikimedia projects, including Wikipedia, Wikiquote, Wikibooks, and Wikisource, to be feminist they need not only address issues of import to women (although Wikimedia’s dearth of information traditionally of interest to women is indeed a feminist issue), but also need to address how behavior and credit in online space structure the creation, design, and content of projects and pages within Wikimedia.

Figure 1. The Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript table 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 Wikimdia suite of projects, including Wikipedia, Wikibooks, and Wikisource. In an experimental spirit, we extended 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 our Wikibook instantiation of the manuscript.

Drawing on Jacqueline Wernimont’s argument that textual content is not the only index of a feminist digital resource [Wernimont 2013, 10], 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 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 Wikimdia contributions, which would attract editors who otherwise might be too overextended in the offline world to be able to contribute without getting credit.
Feminism is understood here as the organized effort to undermine patriarchy, the system in which men, women, and institutions engage in the persistent valuing of things culturally coded as masculine and male over things coded as feminine and female. The burgeoning of sites that store user-generated content need 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 masculinist culture” [Bury 2010, 235]. A technofeminist approach, one which combines the recognition that technology codes with cultural freight including gendered social constructions, is better than the simple feminist approaches to the perception of gendered cultural values via the Web 2.0 context [Bury 2010, 235].

The Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript precludes the edit-a-thons of 2012 and 2013, the project editorial team endorses the #NoMore and #EndPoco editing drives. As Adeline Koh has pointed out, since the average Wikipedia editor “is a college-educated, 30 year old, computer savvy man who lives in the United States or Western Europe, it is unsurprising that the online encyclopedia has its own unconscious ideological leanings” [Koh 2013a]. Those leanings, discussed in more detail below, contribute to an environment that is hostile to women resulting in lower quality of the topics that are culturally coded as feminine and female. "The deferential to women is not a matter of category (she has lower status) but because she is female” [Currie 2011, 53]. According to Herring [2013, 2], "anyone who is a systematic observer of social interaction online... will note that women are more likely than men to be deleted as trivial” [Eckert and Steiner 2013] [Lam et al. 2011]. The social forces that exacerbate female and feminine people’s oppression online, persist online — reinforcing and building on the behaviors and structural barriers that constitute oppression offline.

Although the social edition project predates the edit-a-thons of 2012 and 2013, the project editorial team endorses the #NoMore and #EndPoco editing drives. As Adeline Koh has pointed out, since the average Wikipedia editor “is a college-educated, 30 year old, computer savvy man who lives in the United States or Western Europe, it is unsurprising that the online encyclopedia has its own unconscious ideological leanings” [Koh 2013a]. Those leanings, discussed in more detail below, contribute to an environment that is hostile to women resulting in lower quality of the topics that are culturally coded as feminine and female. "The deferential to women is not a matter of category (she has lower status) but because she is female” [Currie 2011, 53]. According to Herring [2013, 2], “anyone who is a systematic observer of social interaction online... will note that women are more likely than men to be deleted as trivial” [Eckert and Steiner 2013] [Lam et al. 2011]. The social forces that exacerbate female and feminine people’s oppression online, persist online — reinforcing and building on the behaviors and structural barriers that constitute oppression offline.

Understanding of the Social Edition in light of new models of edition production that socialize networking and its commensurate tools — [to develop] the social edition as an extension of the traditions in which it is situated and which it has the potential to inform productively. [Siemers et al. 2012b, 447]

The Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript has been produced by just such a team. The Devonshire Manuscript Editorial Group (or DMSEG) made up of a core team of researchers at the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab (ETCL) and the University of Victoria, and distributed network of scholars, postdoctoral fellows, graduate researchers, and programmers, working with two publishers, is a collaborative editorial board, and self-selected members of the public) is motivated by a desire to render transparent the production of an online edition of the Devonshire Manuscript by a method that privileges process over product. The expectation was that with transparency of workload and contribution would come a flattening of hierarchies, since, where there are power imbalances, the door is open to abuse, particularly of the type that occurs in a gendered social world. In this is not to say that where there is power imbalance sexism is an inevitable result, but it is certainly easier for personal and systemic sexism to go unchecked in a closed hierarchical editorial environment.

The Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript draws on a collaboratively edited manuscript to create a collaboratively edited edition. Edited and circulated by a group of women in Anne Boleyn’s court, the manuscript has, however, served as a source for Sir Thomas Wyatt’s poetry. His verses have been transcribed and published by A. K. Foxwell (1914), Kenneth Muir (1947, 1949, 1969), and Patricia Mary Shelton, Margaret Douglas, and Thomas Howard’s contributions.
Generically, the Devonshire Manuscript itself is a miscellany: including all creative textual works — complete poems, verse fragments and excerpts from longer works, anagrams, and other ephemeral jottings — the manuscript contains 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 Fitzroy, wife of Henry VIII's illegitimate son Henry Fitzroy, is the only member of the identified group who only copied textual points into the manuscript [Baron 1994]. Even amongst the copied text, one finds several factors that suggest the personal engagement, immediacy, and spontaneity of this group.

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 Burrow's estimation, "the richest surviving record of early Tudor poetry and of the literary activities of 16th-century women" [Burrow 2009, 3]. Throughout our process, we maintained mindful of Mandell's assertion that "literary production, reproduction, and reception are all socially mediated, the resulting texts demanding attention in their own right and not just as legitimate or illegitimate variants from authorial archetypes" [Mandell 1993, 212]. The Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript has published the contents 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 Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript addresses the role of women in the production of the manuscript itself. As we noted above, the hetreto unpublished manuscript is the first example of men and women writing together in English. A DMSEG advisor commented, "one of the things [I have been] thinking about is [again] bringing women writers up to the fore, and showing them as a part of a network of writers who were all sort of cross-pollinating and doing all this stuff in a way that's not ghettoizing them, which is what was happening [in scholarship in general]."

The rise of New Historicism and of interdisciplinary studies has sparked new interest in previously overlooked early modern texts, supporting the feminist goal of recovering women's history via translations, treatises, diaries, memoirs, letters, and even crafted objects. "Women's translations are being treated as important literary and cultural texts," explains Micheline White, and women's letters, gifts, and needlework are recognised as important objects of study. Work focusing on women's history is complemented by books and positions that present women writers alongside their male counterparts and that incorporate women's texts into larger literary, cultural, and historical narratives about Tudor England. [White 2010, 488]

Such enquiries have brought many texts written by women to the fore, hastening a shift in scholars' processes of canonizing writers and works. This new critical focus has encouraged researchers, as Sara Jayne Steen suggests, "to re-imagine a manuscript culture that included writers of both sexes" [Steen 2004, 147]. As this new focus of literary study drew scholars' attention to the way court lyrics could reflect the interactions of poetry and power in early modern England, enquiry began to extend beyond the consideration of canonical texts and privileged genres. New Historicism feminist scholarship continued in the vein of the Devonshire Manuscript to women's history. That said, even though its importance to the women's history canon is reason enough to put the Devonshire Manuscript at the centre of a feminist analysis of social editing practices, the tenants of feminist social editing cannot limit content to women's history, but ought to be applicable to all editorial content. Any collaboratively produced edition's work endowed it in affordances of the editorial platform, the structure of information, and the behaviour of collaborators.

Knowledge Organization and Equity at the Level of the Code

Particular platforms may encourage equitable behaviors while others make it easy to persist in personal and systemic sexism. The question of platform and encoding-specific affordances was of particular interest to the DMSEG. Even though the edition resides in Wikibooks, it took a host of social media platforms to coordinate the encoding review process. The context of stakeholder and partner interactions outlined below was facilitated by multiple social media platforms, including blog post comment threads; Wikibooks discussion pages; iter's dedicated Renaissance and early modern online community space; personal interviews via Skype; and Twitter conversations. We have found that each social media platform attracts different stakeholder groups and enables specific types of interaction. Employing and participating in a variety of platforms both alerted us to different priorities across platforms, and forced us to think through how we might create a multispacial experience for safe, productive, and equitable engagement. Most of the content on the project in 2007 was shared via blogs and comments on blogs that were hosted by stakeholders. The most of our community engagement was conducted via the TECL team’s blog. As such, we could edit it. We received feedback from the advisory group via Skype interviews and iter, from the scholar and citizen community via Twitter and blogs, and from the Wikibooks community via Wikibooks itself. Furthermore, we invited feedback via iter's social media space, Twitter and guest blog posts.

As with print facsimile editions, the accurate transcription of the source is at the heart of the social edition. The transcription of the Devonshire Manuscript predates public crowdsourced transcription projects such as Transcribe Bentham. Transcription in an online space would have allowed interested readers to follow, or even to contribute, to the project and such transcription would have been in keeping with the ethos of the Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript. At the time of transcription, however, the team did not have permission to post or circulate the manuscript facsimile, so they had to produce the transcriptions without public input. Two team members worked from paper copies of the Devonshire Manuscript and produced independent transcriptions. In general, their transcriptions were in accord with one another. To settle any conflicting transcriptions, Ray Siemens returned to the British Library in order to compare the transcriptions to the manuscript itself.

In order to ensure an encoding that would be useful to scholars outside of the project, the team then encoded the text in TEI, the mark-up language of the Text Encoding Initiative. In order to keep the editorial and encoding process transparent, the Wikibook edition includes links to the baseline xml-encoded transcription. Thus, in addition to being able to use the xml for their own projects, readers can see the editorial choices the TEI allowed encoders to preserve. Other digital humanities may continue working with the TEI-encoded document, allowing the project to evolve in ways that could not be anticipated at the outset. The TECL team marketed themselves as "an epistemological experiment of open publishing" in their wikibooks project description.

Text encoding, like other digital editorial interventions, merits explicit feminist reflection especially where it may shape what edition users can, through search or programmatic retrieval and counting, learn about the text. While wikicodes, which underpins Wikimedia projects, has no gendered hierarchy built into its standard tag set, at the time of encoding the TEI certainly did. TEI, as Laura Mandell and Melissa Terras argue, with its reliance on ISO standards, relegates women to second standing [Mandell 2013] [Terras 2013]. ISO standards allow four values for sex: 1 - male, 2 - female, 0 - unknown, and 9 - not applicable. The TEI changed the standard in 2013 to allow for locally defined values [Simone de Beauvoir need no longer have her work literalized, by being represented as a member of <sex value="2">, or so the joke goes]. The encoding of the manuscript in TEI P4, which was converted to TEI P5 in 2007, predates the change in the values for @sex and the <sex> element. The germ of the TEI's effort to expand the encoding of the manuscript was in the TECL team's editing of the Devonshire Manuscript in 2010. The TECL team used a combination of methods to gather data on the social edition building process. We conducted qualitative interviews with advisory group members, none of whom had extensive experience editing in Wikimedia, to gather their perspectives on the content of their evolving and fixed editions, as well as on issues of credit, peer review, and collaborative editing. We also enumerated interaction in Wikibooks. Furthermore, we invited feedback via iter's social media space, Twitter and guest blog posts.

In answering the first question of who could edit it, we expected a clash of interpretation between the advisors and the public. [9] 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 comment threads. In light of our experience of the iterative production of the Social Edition, we argue for the importance of incorporating various social platforms into the production and development of the edition, and encourage and even encode the changes that they would like to see as the edition evolved rather than have them critique a fixed and final edition. If a feminist edition is one that guards against the personal and institutional sexism that may (and indeed does) filter into the online world from the offline world, the members of the DMSEG working in the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab (ETCL) at the University of Victoria had to work out which tools and procedures for collaboration, credit, and social engagement would let us iteratively test the feminist affordances of the social edition.

Answering Hostile Conditions Online and Off

The edition-building process situated our text at the intersection of academic and wiki culture. As we traversed this new multidisciplinary ground, we sought advice and responses from a variety of sources. Procedurally, before moving the edition into Wikibooks, the ETCL team prepared a static digital edition of the manuscript. This static edition served as a base text, to which our international advisory group of early modern and Renaissance scholars could compare the Wikibooks as it evolved. Finally, the ETCL team moved the wikicode version of the manuscript into Wikibooks where any member of the DMSEG could edit it. We received feedback from the advisory group via Skype interviews and iter, from the scholar and citizen community via Twitter and blogs, and from the Wikibooks community via Wikibooks itself. In addition to informing and instructing the ETCL team on the early modern content of the edition, the advisory group also offered their opinions on our method.

At worst, we expected a clash of interpretation between the advisors and the public. [9] 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 comment threads. In light of our experience of the iterative production of the social edition, we argue for the importance of incorporating various social platforms into the production and development of the edition, and encourage and even encode the changes that they would like to see as the edition evolved rather than have them critique a fixed and final edition. If a feminist edition is one that guards against the personal and institutional sexism that may (and indeed does) filter into the online world from the offline world, the members of the DMSEG working in the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab (ETCL) at the University of Victoria had to work out which tools and procedures for collaboration, credit, and social engagement would let us iteratively test the feminist affordances of the social edition.
Perhaps predictably, academic and Wikimedia 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 content into the edition to see how we have addressed the issue in the past. Jomegat's intervention and input on this topic was very helpful and, we argue, deserves credit. Helped us to refine our own thinking, and including Jomegat's contributions in the Magic Circle adds to the record of our decision-making process. Ideally, this record will help anyone who considers importing to the discussion pages. For example, the Magic Circle lets us include the tips from our discussion pages offered by Wikimedia editor Jomegat. Jomegat joined in the discussion but did not edit any of our

The Magic Circle gives us the opportunity to assign credit for important editorial work that extends beyond the creation of original content. Discussion and feedback are central to scholarly revision. A print environment, however, often only acknowledges these forms of labor with a line or two on the acknowledgments page. Our initial plan was to visualize user-defined major and minor edits, as well as contributions to the discussion pages. For example, the Magic Circle lets us include the tips from our discussion pages offered by Wikimedia editor Jomegat. Jomegat joined in the discussion but did not edit any of our pages directly. She did, however, offer advice on the finer points of importing content from Wikipedia pages [Jomegat 2011]. In the final analysis, we decided not to import content — Jomegat's suggestions helped us to refine our own thinking, and including Jomegat's contributions in the Magic Circle adds to the record of our decision-making process. Ideally, this record will help anyone who considers importing content into the edition to see how we have addressed the issue in the past. Jomegat's intervention and input on this topic was very helpful and, we argue, deserves credit.
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. Controversy and debate are key to the maturity of a Wikimedia project [Currie 2012, 244], and yet moderating and contributing to debate, which are not so integral to production of a print edition until the peer-review stage, are not usually assigned special credit. In the production of a social-edition, however, debate, mediation, and synthesis are so important that they deserve special credit. Contribution to feminist edit-a-thons which, like the ones organized by THATCamp Feminisms unconferences and Brown University’s edit-a-thon to improve articles about women in science in commemoration of Ada Lovelace’s birthday, should not just happen as the additional labor of activism, but rather work in the interest of public which deserves credit [Koh 2013b] [Winston 2013]. The Magic Circle gives edit-a-thons participants visualizations of their labor that they can point to when seeking credit in the academic workplace.

Addressing issues of credit alone is not enough to make the Wikimedia suite a feminist editorial space. Sexist and racist 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 Cultures4, was subject to sudden abuse on her personal discussion page. The trolling user, Tyrone Jones 2, 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 intrude 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.

The other advisors offered similar sentiments: they wanted to discuss before they revised.

We discussed the community’s talk page norms with Panic, another editor who has taken an interest in our edition. He told us that Wikimedia editors do not use talk pages in the way that our advisors wished. Panic claims, “[people will only use (write) into talk pages to express discontent about something, clear some controversial contribution or gather support for some major change]” [Panic 2012]. Furthermore, he says, in a sidelong critique of Wikimedia’s hostile environment “I think the one thing that I always have in mind is that we are all volunteers so I try to balance criticism with praise for work well done” [Panic 2012]. In short, the Wikibooks discussion pages are comprised of more personal commentary than editorial suggestions. The Wikibooks discussion pages are predominantly venues for editors to offer one another personal support rather than to discuss Wikibook content. The potential for abuse, however, is high, and the hostile environment created by the type of trolling the DMSEG experienced may deter otherwise interested editors from contributing.

Thus, rather than relying on the discussion pages for editorial decisions, we made the most substantive changes in Wikibooks based on our Skype and face-to-face interactions with our advisory group. Although our hope had been to have the advisors edit directly in Wikibooks, some of our advisors found the technological threshold for contributing to Wikibooks too high and the environment too hostile. We found that it was more practical to have the ETCL team make the proposed changes in the Wikibook. We responded to the advisors’ recommendations in near-real time, adding navigation menus and images that the advisors suggested through our ongoing consultation. It happened that we needed many avenues for editorial conversation in order to foster the sense of a community that, as one of our advisors noted, is “virtually there, as if everyone is crowded around a page, putting their two cents in on matters great and small.” Multiple social media platforms facilitate social editing, whereas relying on one single communication platform (such as Wikibooks alone) may impede the success of an evolving social edition with feminist aims.

Implications for Feminist Scholarship

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 feminie people.

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 greater deference accorded to men online. But just as the nineteenth-century novelist who hid behind a male nom de plume did not directly challenge the assumption that women could not produce great literature, non-gendered interaction does nothing to improve the poor impression of the validity of knowledge that women share online. 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 receiving credit, should have the training and status to combat sexist trolling (via rewriting content, entering rules, or even deleting editor accounts); and, in order to foster the peer-review-as-conversation model, builders ought to use multiple online social spaces in order to build the trust and collegiality required to produce investment in a knowledge creation environment.

The poem “All women have virtues 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 not the only reasons scholars resist contributing to Wikimedia projects. While it was easy to avoid civility (if not outright concern for gender equality) in Iter’s social space, it was very challenging to confront the systemic and direct sexism in Wikibooks. The wiki format itself does not discourage gender equality per se — we interpret our experience of sexism in Wikibooks as a reflection of women’s continued status in the culture at large. Regardless, simply avoiding engagement with Wikimedia is not a suitable or effective response to this issue. The Wikimedia suite of projects remains a key information resource for the general public; therefore, it behooves us as scholars and feminists to be certain that as a knowledge community Wikimedia is free of trolling, engages in the non-paternalistic organization of knowledge, and offers appropriate credit in order to increase gender equality, rather than marginalize women and the topics of interest to them.

Notes


[2] However, recent initiatives have started to move in this direction, including projects such as EEBO Interactions, “a social networking resource for Early English Books Online,” George Mason University’s “Crowdsourcing Documentary Transcription: An Open Source Tool,” and Transcribe Bentham, among others.


[4] A not-for-profit consortium dedicated to the development and distribution of scholarly Middle Age and Renaissance online resources in partnership with Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies and Adam Matthew Digital, a digital academic publisher.

[5] Robert E. Bjork (Director, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies; Arizona State University), William R. Bowen (Chair) (Director, Iter, University of Toronto Scarborough), Michael Uyldt (University of Calgary), Diane Jakacki (Georgia Institute of Technology), Jessica Murphy (University of Texas at Dallas), Jason Boyd (Ryerson University), Elizabeth Heale (University of Reading), Steven W. May (Georgetown College), Arthur F. Marotti (Wayne State University), Jennifer Summit (Stanford University), Jonathan Gibson (Queen Mary, University of London), John Laurin (King's College London), and Katherine Rowe (Bryn Mawr College).


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


[9] 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.’”

[10]“We interpret our experience of sexism in Wikibooks as a reflection of women’s continued status in the culture at large.”

[11] We can be found on Twitter at @Devonshire_MS.

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