

# EXCHANGE

## My first feminist edit-a-thon

By Elizabeth Kostina '20

Making change in the struggle for gender equality, with a little help from superheroes.



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*In March the Class of 1945 Library held its first **Art + Feminism Wikipedia edit-a-thon**, joining an ongoing international campaign to “improve content on cis and trans*

women and the arts on Wikipedia, and to encourage women to participate as editors of the online encyclopedia." The event was offered in conjunction with the Lamont Gallery exhibition "[Representing Feminism\(s\)](#)."

*In piloting this event, the Library staff was able to gauge student interest in using information literacy skills for activism. Going forward, they hope to work with a group of interested students to plan future edit-a-thons on gender, art or other issues of interest.*

*We asked Elizabeth Kostina '20 to share her experiences from the event.*

I was momentarily lost.

"There's a poster for the event," my friend said, pointing to a concrete beam where a black and hot pink poster watched over a huddle of people on their computers.

The library commons were empty, save for a small group working in the corner.

"I guess... that's it...?" I said.

My overactive imagination shook its head at me as I spun on my heel, searching for an icon of a feminist avenger, perhaps waiting to pop out of the doorway: I had expected something loud and rude, something wonderfully annoying. Like someone wearing no bra and a lopsided pink hat, with a cape flapping in the artificial air conditioning, brandishing a ruler and standing on a table yelling about the gender gap, thrusting arms and ruler forward to spur us on, the minions below who typed furiously on our computers editing articles.

Ms. Rohloff, the reference librarian, noticed me.

"Wikipedia?" I asked. She waved me toward her.

To the left of the library commons, a small classroom housed the entirety of the Wikipedia edit-a-thon.

Some students, a teacher, three PEA librarians, and Phoebe Ayers, the MIT librarian who was to lead the event, made up the attendance.

The dark brown Harkness table took up most of the space. Back in the left corner was the promised pizza, and for those who had forgotten their computers \*cough cough\*

there were several workhorse laptops.

(I checked under the table. There was no cape-wearing heroine.)

Right away several of us cracked open our laptops and the reverberation of computer fans and the slurping of juice boxes filled the room.

With a brief introduction, Ms. Ayers plunged into her description of how to edit Wikipedia. Using Emily Dickinson as an example, she explained the basics of editing articles: where to look for citations and sources; the importance of correct grammar; and how to use the text edit machine.

(Interestingly enough, Wikipedia is programmed in Hack and an open source package written in PHP called MediaWiki.)

It was as if the Hulk had ripped a car apart with his bare hands and begun explaining to me how everything works. The dismantling of any system is always a sight to watch, and I was *enraptured*. The background workings of Wikipedia are open to essentially anyone, and it isn't hard to figure out how the site works. Seeing how it fits together is the real treat, how one part affects the other, just like a well-oiled machine.

I always took Wikipedia as a given. It was a website, more informative and not as sketchy as others, and a continuing source of teacher scolding. "You shouldn't use Wikipedia." "Why not?" "Well, anyone can edit Wikipedia, so you don't know if the information is reliable or not."

Ms. Ayers explained that in order to start a new article, your information is thoroughly fact-checked and must go through a peer review process. The effort it takes to get one article up there, much less 5,614,173 English articles, makes me feel stressed just to think about.

A few more mind-blowing facts: there are 33,381,465 registered Wikipedia users and 137,073 regular contributors. The incredible scale and reach of Wikipedia — how it can connect millions of people across the globe in a collaborative process — is hard to grasp and also breathtaking. The amount of information passed person-to-person draws to mind the startling image of a chain reaction, while in reality the total amount of text in the English Wikipedia is only about 13-14 gigabytes compressed. We can fit that on an SD card.

Of course, I'm getting off-topic with my ramblings about file size. The true purpose of the Art + Feminism edit-a-thon is to encourage people identifying as female to edit

Wikipedia articles. Fewer than 10% of Wikipedia editors identify as female and this event intends to help close this shocking gap.

We have a long way to go. This first edit-a-thon at Exeter focused on teaching the basics. I'm looking forward to its repeat, when those of us who attended can help teach others.

At that point, when the event is free-form and free-flowing, the true spirit of embracing feminism will shine through. Until we reach this equilibrium dynamic of the learned and the learning, we cannot truly hope to encompass what the Art + Feminism campaign strives to do.

*Elizabeth Kostina is a lawyer from Michigan who thrives on digital challenges. She is currently helping to organize TEDx Exeter, which is slated to run in the fall.*

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