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# Connecting Wikipedia and the Archive: Building a Public History of HIV/AIDS in New York City

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### Abstract

This essay illustrates a particular instance of how the construction of knowledge can be democratized in a way that simultaneously preserves shared ideas of trust and reliability, via effective collaborations of students, scholars, and archivists. The described 2015 project, collaboratively designed by archivists and historians of the La Guardia & Wagner Archives (“the Archives”) and faculty and librarians of LaGuardia Community College, involves early career college students in the production of a needed public history of the outbreak and impact of HIV/AIDS in New York City. This work demonstrates how community college students can become junior scholars working with primary source archival collections in a manner similar to researchers working on projects as part of institutional fellowships. Utilization of a Wikipedia as a non-commercial, public, open access, information source also succeeds in raising web traffic, visibility, and accessibility for unique and valuable archival collections. Collaborations across disciplines and departments allows libraries and archives to take on new roles as conductors of the inclusive creation of public histories.

*Keywords:* Wikipedia, GLAM, La Guardia Community College, HIV/AIDS New York City

Then there is Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia where anyone with opposable thumbs and a fifth-grade education can publish anything on any topic from AC/DC to Zoroastrianism. Since Wikipedia's birth, more than fifteen thousand contributors have created nearly three million entries in over a hundred languages—none of them edited or vetted for accuracy. . . . It's the blind leading the blind—infinite monkeys providing infinite information for infinite readers, perpetuating the cycle of misinformation and ignorance. (Keen, 2007, p. 4)

Public distrust of traditional media channels in the months following the 2016 American presidential election has prompted a renewed interest in the epistemological role of websites like Wikipedia. While criticisms such as Andrew Keen's that rest upon problematic amateur/expert binaries persist, more recent press highlights how Wikipedia's structural reliance on traditional and verifiable sources supports, rather than weakens, the online status of established and vetted publications (Keller, 2017; Jackson, 2017). For this reason, established institutions such as the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) have partnered with Wikipedia in innovative projects designed to improve online and offline outreach. One might even say that in some cases, Wikipedia is a crowdsourced resource that privileges traditional sources too much. This could be one of the reasons that cause coverage gaps — inherent biases can accompany a limited contributor pool (Allum).

Debates surrounding the impact of technological change in scholarly practice can evoke emotional responses to anxieties about total replacement framed by falsely oppositional dualisms: amateurs will replace experts, print media will give way to digital media, and the traditional will succumb to the modern. Matt Barton (2009) has

observed how the inherent elitism of academic practice often dissuades use or even acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of Wikipedia:

(A) Web site ‘that anyone could edit’ is a Web site that only an idiot would trust. The very idea that a professor was referring students to Wikipedia or using it to teach her courses struck them as the height of absurdity. Wikis seem to represent an almost antiacademic perspective toward knowledge—the triumph of Vandals who have overrun the library. Some of us may agree with Wikipedia cofounder and expatriate Larry Sanger, who argues incessantly to anyone willing to listen that a little elitism is all Wikipedia really needs. (p. 177)

The goals of the project described in the following narrative attempt to provide an example for how the construction of knowledge can be democratized in a way that simultaneously preserves shared ideas of trust and reliability, via effective collaborations of students, scholars, and archivists. Its goals were not entirely defined by the abstract Wikipedia mission of adding to the sum of human knowledge, but with the simultaneous aim of actively engaging community college students in the production and processes of public history. There were numerous challenges involved in this approach, requiring frequent negotiations both with students in order to keep them involved, as well as within the Wikipedia community, making easy declaration of success tenuous. However, this experimental approach can be viewed as one step in the direction of public history envisioned by scholars such as Hilda Kean, who has called on the importance of “recognizing the need to share, participate, and engage not so much as ‘experts’ in ‘history’ but as people with an interest in the relationship between the past and present—willing to explore, acknowledge, and value different ways of configuring this” (p. 38).

The charge that Wikipedia can be written by “blind monkeys” is a fundamental misunderstanding of what kind of encyclopedia the site it is. Even though the structure of wiki platforms easily allows anyone to technically write an entry, the accompanying community that governs what readers see on Wikipedia generally provides a surprising amount of “peer review” and verification. The content itself is mainly not written by amateurs, as might be the case with a blog - that would go against the policy of “no original research” - but primarily summarization of information published in scholarly and popular sources, both print and digital, and accompanied by sometimes excessive citation. These citations provide a level of visibility and accessibility to content housed in media and institutional sites with lower page ranks that encourages formal and informal collaborations between institutions, media outlets, publishers and the Wikipedia community. In a literature review of changing attitudes of the educational benefits of Wikipedia written by Piotr Konieczny (2016), these misperceptions are more fully discussed, and the author calls for a much wider acknowledgment of the potential educational and social benefits of Wikipedia classroom projects. Educators interested in initiating more productive conversations about Wikipedia at their institutions can call upon a number of community sources that are connected to or originate with the Wikimedia Foundation. The GLAM-Wiki program (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums working with Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM>) and the Wiki Education Foundation (“Wiki Ed,” [wikiedu.org](http://wikiedu.org)) are two initiatives that document and actively support past and present academic and institutional partnerships.

### **Shifting attitudes towards Wikipedia in academia and libraries**

In an overview of a Fall 2016 research study on student learning outcomes using Wikipedia-based assignments conducted by Zachary McDowell and sponsored by the Wiki Education Foundation, LiAnna Davis (2017) highlights the increasing number of college and university instructors affiliated with the educational program – over 6,000 students in over 90 countries. These numbers are also conservative in that they do not include participation by college courses not registered with Wiki Ed’s Dashboard platform. McDowell’s research shows how both instructors and students found usage of Wikipedia improved learning of information and digital literacy skills, a need increasingly evident in an online ecosystem complicated by “fake news” and deceptive commercial practices (Davis, 2017). The research study also mapped how Wikipedia assignments effectively transmit core information literacy skills from the Association of College and Research Libraries’ *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2016).

At the same time, this potential for good needs to be considered in light of a justifiable criticism of Wikipedia as a democratic space. To what extent does Wikipedia genuinely reflect the information needs and resources of the entire community that it serves? The “gender gap” in the body of Wikipedia editors has been widely commented upon in the scholarly community and popular media, with less than 15% of the editor pool identified as female (Wagner, et. al. 2015). Leigh Gruwell (2015) has been amongst the critics who have issued important warnings about how the structure and community operations of Wikipedia can worsen, rather than democratize, the problems of information sharing for a traditional scholarship that relies on “patriarchial

methodologies and epistemologies” (p. 118). If Wikipedia continues to present itself merely as an online imitation of the traditional encyclopedia, it will not fulfill its larger mission of truly serving as a global and inclusive information resource.

The Wikimedia Foundation does recognize how this “systemic bias” can negatively affect content when there is a continuing homogeneity in participation along the lines of gender, race, ability, class, language, or geographic location (“Systemic Bias,” 2017). Projects such as Art+Feminism (“Art+Feminism,” 2017) and AfroCROWD (“AfroCrowd,” 2017), born from grassroots activities of the Wikimedia New York community group, are key strategies supported by the Foundation to help address this problem. Of course, “systemic bias” is not a problem limited to the Wikipedia space, but one that is reflected in many other global online communities. It is also not absent from traditional information sources either, although more concerted efforts to combat them can be directed by editorial controls, explicitly setting out parameters of inclusive coverage (Reagle & Rhue, 2011).

What follows is an example of a GLAM project, one collaboratively designed by archivists and historians with the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives (“the Archives”) and LaGuardia Community College’s faculty and librarians, involving beginning college students in the production of a needed localized historical narrative summarizing key events and issues relating to the outbreak and impact of HIV/AIDS in New York City (“GLAM/La Guardia and Wagner Archives,” 2017). Our intent is to actively involve early career college students in a process of research, writing, and online community participation that will help further Wikipedia’s mission of democratizing knowledge building.



### **WikiProject: La Guardia & Wagner Archives**

The teaching philosophy guiding LaGuardia Community College has emphasized and supported innovative practices since its establishment in 1971. Expectations of students exceed those customarily located in two-year colleges (LaGuardia). In 2009, I helped initiate a mutually supportive relationship between LaGuardia Community College, the Wikipedia community and the Wikimedia Foundation's educational outreach programs. Along with offering professional development programs, grants, and seminars, LaGuardia's Center for Teaching and Learning provides the space and time for cross-disciplinary faculty to meet and situate the use of technology in the classroom. The context of this program allowed for Professor of English Ximena Gallardo C. to start a conversation with archivist Tara Jean Hickman on how Wikipedia could be used in the classroom. Ximena and I (a teaching librarian at the College) have been partnering on such courses based on mutual interests in both science fiction literature and using Wikipedia for classroom assignments for several years. These courses focus on science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler and utilize Wikipedia as a platform for collaborative student writing, both public and private. In April 2015, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives director, Dr. Richard Lieberman, contacted the two of us to discuss the possibility of a Wikipedia project designed to highlight the Archives' holdings and provide a unique research opportunity for a select group of volunteer students. Dr. Lieberman wanted to provide our community college students with the opportunity to gain experience doing the kind of independent scholarly research that students of this level rarely get exposure to. At the same time, they would be provided with valuable mentoring from archivists and instructors involved in the project.

### The “Mayor Ed Koch Scholars”

In May 2015, Ximena and I met with the archivists to start planning the initial stages of this project, proposing ways to provide incentives and recruit the student-scholars. We chose to focus research specifically on the Mayor Edward I. Koch collection, a selection of primary and secondary sources in need of greater scholarly examination. Mayor Koch’s tenure, 1978-1989, was one of the most dramatic periods in New York City history, coinciding with major changes in urban development as well as the trauma of the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. At the start we set some flexible parameters for the project: two to four students would conduct independent research in the Archives, with weekly advisement in the Fall and Spring semesters. Their work would result in the “publication” of new or augmented Wikipedia entries, where they could add citations to archival holdings and secondary sources. Local Wikimedia NYC chapter leaders (community volunteers working with organizational support from the Wikimedia Foundation) were then invited to a planning meeting for assistance setting this up formally up as a GLAM project with associated page hosted on Wikipedia (Figure 1). Chapter president Richard Knipel, who also has a background in New York City history, suggested an entry whose absence was surprising - that of a localized narrative history of HIV/AIDS in New York City. Such entries naturally exist in specialized encyclopedias like the *Encyclopedia of New York City*, edited by Kenneth T. Jackson. The planning team reacted with enthusiasm to this suggestion. This localized historical narrative would provide a crucial resource for students and scholars to cultivate a more accurate understanding of an important part of our past. It would also serve as a portal to key archival documents, oral histories media and reports, as much of this information can be difficult to find out about, particularly for researchers in other parts of the world without direct access to local archives. Equally importantly,

such an entry would allow students to focus on aspects of the entry that matched their fields of study; for instance, a pre-med student chose to write about the medical history of the disease, adding to the overall pedagogical value of this endeavor.

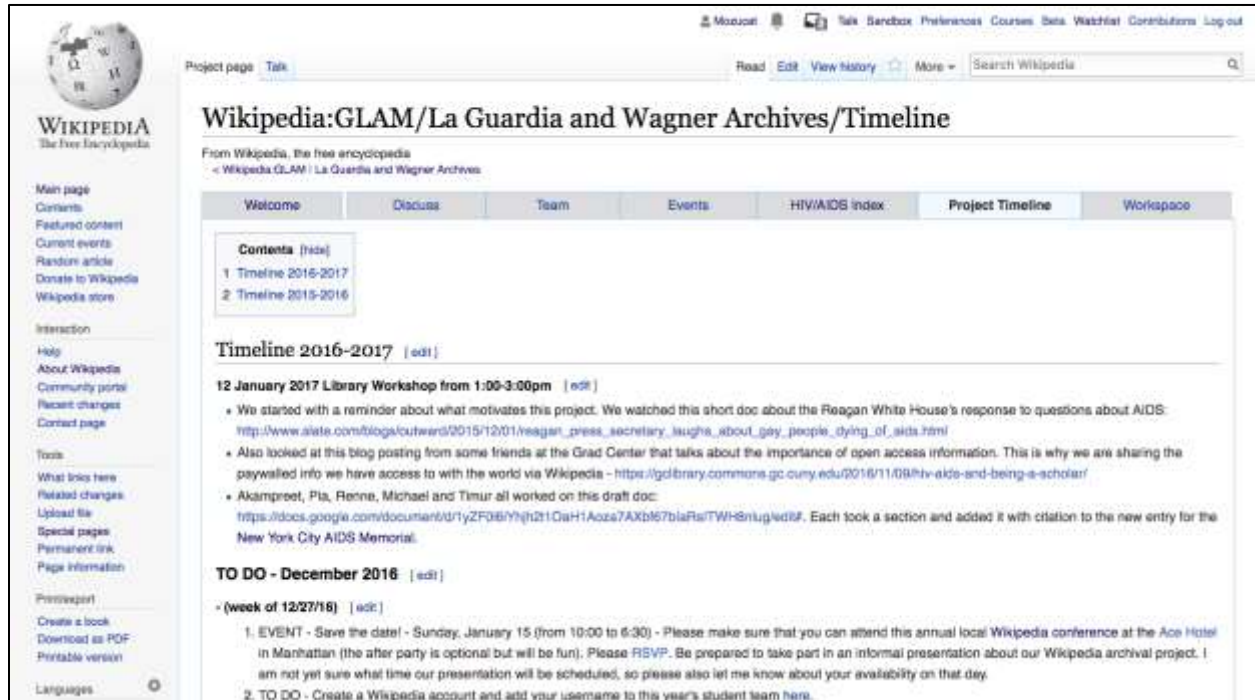


Figure 1. Wikipedia project page with timeline. Wikipedia:GLAM/La Guardia and Wagner Archives/Timeline. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM/La\\_Guardia\\_and\\_Wagner\\_Archives/Time\\_line](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM/La_Guardia_and_Wagner_Archives/Time_line). Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License (WP:CC BY-SA).

The approach we utilized in order to reach one of our material goals - the drafting of a localized historical narrative of HIV/AIDS in New York City - organically developed into something multidimensional, providing lessons and experiences not typically provided by traditional instructional strictures, allowing us to discover that students could develop personal growth via learning more about scholarly practices. In the Fall 2015 semester, the planning team presented this opportunity to the student

community as an independent research project/internship with a time commitment of about three hours a week for a duration of six to seven months, concluding with a special scholarship award and recognition. In December 2015, eight students attended an introductory meeting about the project, and from that group six were chosen as the first class of “Mayor Ed Koch Scholars.” The initial training for the project work was divided into two areas: content and format, allowing the archivists/historians and Wikipedia specialists to devote more attention appropriately. Sessions on archival research and the history of New York City and Mayor Ed Koch were led by the archivists, and instruction in Wikipedia editing, writing/language and online community issues were presented by the English professor and librarian team. During the first project week in January 2017, the students met with archivists to learn about the Koch Administration and NYC in the 1970s and 1980s and to acquire background information about the AIDS epidemic to establish context for their independent research. The students were then provided with training in two other key areas: specialized writing strategies to fit this collaborative, digital model, and generalized library research skills with which to complement and guide the specialized primary source research that they would conduct in the Archives.

### **Collaborative and digital writing and learning**

Writing for Wikipedia provides particularly useful examples for how context shapes the form of language and presentation of information. In her research paper writing classes, Ximena presents these as two different kinds of writing styles: encyclopedic writing (with a Wikipedia entry as an end goal) and more traditional thesis-based writing (with an argued and supported research paper as end goal). The

research summarized for the Wikipedia entries are then used for the research paper, in a process that encourages a fuller analysis of all sources used. Gaining experience with contrasting styles of writing also provides students with a better understanding of how to customize their writing for different locations and contexts.

Students are also trained on how writing for Wikipedia involves awareness of the online community's set of policies and customs that need to be carefully navigated so that contributions not be "reverted" or undone. In every iteration of the class, students were surprised by how much the overarching emphasis on citation on Wikipedia exceeds the demands of a traditional paper – in some cases every sentence needs specific citation for facts presented. However, the technical structure of the site with numerous citation and editing tools served frequently to ease the process. As with many other college classes in a variety of subject areas that I have worked with, gaining technical competencies with wikis is usually as quick as its original Hawaiian language name suggests. It is the socio-political and cultural aspects that govern behavior in the Wikipedia community that can be more of a challenge to negotiate.

### **Peer instruction**

In an early group meeting, the students decided that a historical timeline would help provide structure to the narrative sections that they were individually responsible for. They created these timelines separately with added commentary and later met to discuss ways of integrating and editing them to fit the context of the destination Wikipedia entry. After this was completed, each student began work on drafting different sections of the collective entry: medical research, activism, education,

government response and comparison with the other city that confronted AIDS at this time, San Francisco. The students proceeded to comment on and assist each other with the drafts of their sections, both online via their Wikipedia sandboxes and in person during collective editing meetings with faculty. The students' work was comprehensive, but many aspects of this important history need to be both reported and collected, pointing towards future work for future students.

### **Experiential learning**

The director of the La Guardia and Wagner Archives, Dr. Richard Lieberman, reminded the planning team often that in our consideration of project outcomes we needed to privilege the learning process over the end “product” – the final, “published” Wikipedia entry. Even if the entry failed to be posted or was immediately deleted by Wikipedia editors, students would have gained experiences and skills from their project work – as much, if not more, than what would be accomplished in a traditional course. Working directly and intensely, one-on-one with their mentors (faculty and archivists) and participating in related scholarly and community events and conferences would also become an invaluable aspect of this learning process. During the time frame of the project's first year, students were invited to Wikipedia “edit-a-thons” (informal working sessions where participants draw upon local library collections and on the expertise of Wikipedians to work on these entries in areas where coverage is lacking) at local cultural institutions to share information about their work in presentations with faculty as well as learn more about the workings of the Wikipedia community by taking part in designed activities (“Wikipedia Meetup,” 2017). By

participating in these events, students moved from being witnesses to the process of public history to becoming actively involved in its creation.

The Wikimedia New York chapter has been involved in an increasing number of events, workshops and partner programs with cultural, educational and activist groups (87 in 2016), giving our students numerous opportunities to interact with and present their work to a diverse body of artists, activists, technologists, academics and unaffiliated volunteers (“Wikimedia New York,” 2017). Beginning with the annual local Wikipedia conference at NYU’s Interactive Technology Program in January 2016, one of the student scholars gave a lightning talk with me to announce our GLAM project to the community. In March 2016, two other student scholars accompanied Ximena and myself to the area’s largest and most widely covered event, Art+Feminism, held at the Museum of Modern Art in March 2016 (“Art+Feminism,” 2017). The students and their news of the project were met with tremendous interest and support, providing them with beneficial experiential learning, especially for community college students who often cannot take advantage of such opportunities.

In June 2016, an event entitled Wiki Loves Pride 2016 was hosted by the Museum of Modern Art Library, with the intent of strengthening needed content areas on Wikipedia that needs more attention - entries related to LGBTQ histories, arts and culture (“Wiki Loves,” 2017). The event was opened by a “lightning talk” presentation given by three of the 2016 team of student scholars where they got a chance to unveil their newly posted Wikipedia entry on HIV/AIDS in New York (Figure 2). Attendees were surprised to hear that such an entry did not exist prior to this, and that so much needed work remains undone. The production of public history and its reflection in the global open access information source that Wikipedia has become is far from

complete. A great deal more is yet to be done to make Wikipedia the truly comprehensive, open access information source that it has the potential of becoming. The Wikipedia editors at the event immediately started work on improving the entry, cleaning up small citation details, adding a graph and providing useful feedback for improving and organizing it.



Figure 2. Wikipedia entry on HIV/AIDS in New York City originally drafted by project students. En.Wikipedia.org. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HIV/AIDS\\_in\\_New\\_York\\_City](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HIV/AIDS_in_New_York_City). Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License (WP:CC BY-SA).

In October 2016, with assistance from a number of sources, the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, the Wikimedia Foundation, Professor Ximena Gallardo C. and I travelled with two of the student-scholars to present our project at the national Wikipedia conference in San Diego. Support was mainly provided by *Consumer Reports*, a publication whose interest in public health and outreach



involves a close partnership with venues like Wikipedia and hosts a key community member, Lane Rasberry, serving as their “Wikipedian-in-Residence” (also serving as our continuing Wikipedia project advisor).

### **Challenges**

The successful presentation of a newly created Wikipedia entry in June 2016 did not happen without recurring challenges that needed to be actively addressed. The time commitment on the part of both students and faculty was the main factor that threatened project failure. Independent study projects can be difficult to fit into overburdened schedules. The research and writing process also required more consistent guidance than we initially anticipated. At times, it seemed that the draft entries were far too voluminous to be converted into sections of an easily read and condensed encyclopedia entry. While students as independent scholars were given free rein to follow all directions their research took them, there was a need to re-focus their attention at different points in the project year. The students also struggled with the impersonal nature of Wikipedia encyclopedia writing, with its frequent prohibitions of “no original research” and insistence on a difficult kind of objectivity. The students often repeated: “I know I can’t give my opinion.” This hindrance to the flow of their writing might be lessened by incorporating ways of adding more collaborative process into the writing as well as reviewing.

Our planning team also wondered if the systems of governance and quality control on Wikipedia might cause hostile editing or deletions of content added, considering that “edit wars” occur in entries with far less gravity (Miller). This kind of

vetting may not be as cautious as that of scholarly peer review, and involves a new set of problematic issues (e.g., “sock puppetry,” 2017), but the potential number of and seriousness of reviewers challenges the description that this is a system of “the blind leading the blind” (Keen, 2007, p. 4). With the ongoing assistance from our Wikipedia chapter advisors, we did not encounter any unwarranted attention, other than the deletion of photographs that we had uploaded with permission from the Archives. Contributions of images and video content are more vigilantly self-policed due to observance of intellectual property conventions, and our photos required more explicit letters of permission.

### **Open access and open participation**

Outside involvement from the Wikipedia community can also be constructive and helpful in a way that inspires hope and confidence about the continuance of open access and open source content and platforms. In the second year of our project, the students and faculty introduced the nature of the work by drafting and posting a needed but brief Wikipedia entry (called a “stub”) together in the library classroom (WP: New York City AIDS Memorial). Each of the five students worked on a different section of the entry, learning how to summarize and cite the provided newspaper articles and institutional websites. During this three-hour session we created enough to justify posting it online, and the students gained hands-on experience with how research can translate into an encyclopedia article in a location that is accessible and useful to everyone. A few minutes after posting, the students were surprised to see changes being made to their entry. We looked around at each other, then checked the “history” tab where each change is tracked in connection with editor user accounts or IP

addresses and we saw that a stranger out there in the wiki-verse was fixing the citation formats in real-time (“New York City AIDS Memorial,” 2017). The shifting boundaries of ownership was initially a jarring experience for the students, but upon reflection, the group became curious about how the entry could develop with outsider attention. This collaborative aspect of knowledge production provides an additional valuable lesson that questions the elitism of traditional authorship and ownership. These should not be the sole measures of trust and reliability. Just because anyone can contribute information to Wikipedia, does not automatically mean that the information is worthless. The imagined Wikipedian as anonymous, amateur 8-year-old might be correctly typing in properly cited information while sitting in a library children’s room. As in all cases, the responsibility is borne ultimately by the reader to assess the value of the information in relation to the context of its use. With its global reach and circulation, Wikipedia is one of the current social experiments where individuals with privileged access and motivation to share can help address the inequities of information access that hinder public education (Naughton).

The insistence on what Daniels and Thistlethwaite (2016) describe as “legacy scholarship” where the reach of knowledge produced is intentionally limited to privileged audiences, contradicts the values of public education and a striving to do genuinely “transformational work” (p. 7-8; p. 124). If we are as concerned with social justice as with retention and graduation rates, we need to find ways to make students aware of and actively engaged with the scholarly process. As Matt Barton (2008) points out in a essay about the role that wikis in the future of higher education, teaching with tools like Wikipedia can provides the “strong civic or service-learning potential” sought by scholar-activists (p. 178).

A Wikipedia project also does not seem so provocative if you consider how ideas of reputable authorship and textual production have also changed over time. Diderot's *Encyclopédie* was built upon populist Enlightenment notions – that a work can be created by a community to function as a mirror of observable human experience, written for the larger community and not preserved as secret knowledge for a limited elite (Yeo, 2007, p. 50). If Wikipedia is the current iteration of this rather grand aim, what is new is not just the breadth of its content, but its means of construction – an attempt at making every reader simultaneously an editor. Even one of the most canonical English language reference works, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, relied upon a large and mysterious pool of voluntary contributors, both professional and amateur. Editor James Murray discovered that one of its most prolific contributors was an American expat residing in an insane asylum. Even in the past, expertise was often self-appointed (Lanxon, 2011).

### **Future directions**

In October 2016, the project planning team began outreach for the second year of the Wikipedia+Archives project. We had talked about including guided in-person research sessions with the students by arranging “field trips” to other museums and archives. We invited interested student applicants to accompany us to the Art AIDS America exhibit at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. This trip stimulated ideas for focusing research, and the students’ exposure to the artworks in such a moving historical survey provided a sense of the affective climate during the AIDS crisis and its continuing aftermath. This would also allow us to introduce the work and ourselves to the students, and we could gauge their specific interests and commitment. We were

accompanied by one of the Mayor Koch Scholars from the last cohort and by Lane Rasberry, our advisor from the Wikipedia community and *Consumer Reports* who also helped us to explain the nature of the project.

In order to address the challenge of scheduling enough faculty and student time for this work, we now seek to create more formalized options for this independent study project, and in the next academic year, we might offer this as a co-taught credit-bearing course offered by the Library department. We also would like to work on further integrating and creating more primary source research materials, such as student-collected oral histories with video and audio interviews with activists and historians in the New York City community. This material would be added to the Wikimedia Commons to support research more broadly.

The LaGuardia and Wagner Archives Wikipedia project has demonstrated how community college students can become junior scholars working with primary source archival collections in a manner similar to researchers working on projects as part of institutional fellowships. We also expect that visibility for archival collections will also be increased via pointers in Wikipedia entries with significant web traffic. Collaborations across disciplines and departments and partnerships between people can allow for libraries and archives to take on new roles as new conductors of the inclusive creation of public histories.

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Ann Matsuuchi is an instructional technology librarian and associate professor at LaGuardia Community College, CUNY. Ann is actively involved with the Wikipedia community in New York City and its many groundbreaking educational outreach projects. Other research interests include: gender and identities in science fiction, tv, comic books and the work of Samuel R. Delany. A selection of these essays are available via the CUNY institutional open access repository:

[http://academicworks.cuny.edu/do/search/?q=author\\_lname:%22Matsuuchi%22](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/do/search/?q=author_lname:%22Matsuuchi%22)

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