Pragmatic Explorations towards Understanding Wikipedia in an Academic Context

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Résumée

Construit au cours des vingt dernières années et contenant maintenant des millions d'articles divers, Wikipédia est devenu une encyclopédie mondialement reconnue et un puits profond d'informations utilisées quotidiennement par le grand public. Alors que Wikipédia était à l'origine étiqueté par les universitaires comme non digne de confiance, introuvable et tabou, la compréhension actuelle de la plate-forme évolue. Notamment, les chercheurs et chercheuses commencent à saisir le vaste potentiel offert par Wikipédia pour un engagement étendu et légitime avec les créateurs et créatrices de connaissances à la fois au sein et au-delà de l'académie. Cet article traite de quatre initiatives de connaissances ouvertes menées par l'Electronic Textual Cultures Lab à l'Université de Victoria qui explorent l'impact de la participation à Wikipédia.

Abstract

Built over the last twenty years and now containing millions of diverse articles, Wikipedia has become a globally recognized encyclopedia and a deep well of information used daily by the general public. While Wikipedia was originally labelled by academics as untrustworthy, untraceable, and taboo, present understandings of the platform are shifting. Notably, scholars are beginning to grasp the vast potential offered by Wikipedia for extended, legitimate engagement with knowledge builders both within and beyond the academy. This paper discusses four open knowledge initiatives spearheaded by The Electronic Textual Cultures Lab at the University of Victoria that explore the impact of Wikipedia participation.

1 Introduction

Launched nearly two decades ago, Wikipedia was designed with the lofty aim of creating "a free encyclopedia – indeed, the largest encyclopedia in history, both in terms of breadth and depth" (Wikipedia 2019d). This goal has, by most measures, since been realized: English Wikipedia contains nearly 6.2 million articles that boast a daily pageview average of over 263 million (cf. Wikipedia n.d.; MusikAnimal et al. 2020). Since 2003, it has been hosted by the Wikimedia Foundation, which offers a suite of knowledge tools including hundreds of additional language encyclopedias,

an open book publishing framework, a data repository, a media common, and other educational resources (cf. Wikipedia Contributors 2020). Emerging out of the Web 2.0 movement in the early 2000s, Wikipedia moves beyond merely harnessing user content and, instead, is almost entirely constituted by user contributions (cf. Tkacz 2015: 4).

Interestingly, academic perceptions of Wikipedia are now changing. Previously, Wikipedia was considered to be fraught with potentially illegitimate information, developed by untraceable amateurs, and reviewed by similarly unknown actors – in short, untrusted sources. Presently, many scholars consider Wikipedia as a platform with considerable potential for legitimacy and engagement by those within and beyond academic professions (cf. Burke 2012; Vandendorpe 2015). Sustained attention to article creation, editing, and approval practices have improved qualitative assurance such that the site has become increasingly reliable and comprehensive. Current efforts underway to broaden and diversify the encyclopedia speak to its further potential as well. In contrast to the commonly defined antagonistic relationship between the university and public knowledge (cf. Leitch 2014: 6), this paper seeks to demonstrate how – through experimentation, productive failure, and redoubled efforts – Wikipedia can facilitate impactful and expansive knowledge sharing. The potential power of Wikimedia projects as platforms for academic research, pedagogy, and knowledge dissemination is immense.

Over the past decade, The Electronic Textual Cultures Lab (ETCL) has been collectively focused on the pursuit of open social scholarship, and Wikipedia and its related initiatives are a foundational part of the open knowledge ecosystem. The ETCL is a "collaborative centre for digital and open scholarly practices" (Electronic Textual Cultures Lab 2018) located at the University of Victoria (UVic) in Victoria, Canada. With a mandate including research, teaching, and service activities, the ETCL is an intellectual hub for the activities of some twenty local faculty, staff, and students as well as visiting scholars, who work closely with research centres, libraries, academic departments, and projects locally, regionally, and internationally. As a research group, the ETCL values openness and, as such, often conducts research projects centred on the topics of public knowledge, social knowledge creation, and knowledge sharing. Using our joined efforts to populate Wikipedia and its various platforms aligns directly with our ethos, and we have undertaken key research activities in order to study how best to engage with Wikipedia from an academic standpoint.

Using four case studies, this paper presents the results of our research team's efforts to understand the role of Wikipedia and other tools in the Wikimedia suite in real terms, in the midst of its changing perception among those in academic professions. First, it examines the pilot Wikipedia Engagement Project, which experimented with the integration of scholarly knowledge and Wikipedia pages. Second, it looks at the innovative social, scholarly edition of the Devonshire Manuscript in Wikibooks, Wikimedia's platform for user-generated and -edited textbooks. Third, partnering with Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE), the Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the UVic Libraries, the ETCL has developed an Honorary Resident Wikipedian program that appoints prominent open scholarship researchers as stewards to help promote Wikipedia engagement through delivering lectures and leading edit-a-thons. Finally, the latest public scholarship effort has been the creation of the Open Knowledge Program, a group of initiatives that invites university faculty, staff, and students, as well as community members, to propose individual research projects, develop them with lab support, and contribute knowledge to Wikipedia. This paper details the successes and challenges of these four Wikipedia-based open scholarship initiatives and shares our collected reflections on the lessons we have learned across each instance in terms of how to best incorporate academic research and scholarship into a public knowledge environment.

2 Initiative 1: Wikipedia Engagement

In 2017, the ETCL and INKE embarked on a joint venture to better understand how to weave elements of their scholarship into the social information environment of Wikipedia. The principal motivation behind the project was the INKE advisors' desire to share their research with the public, as appropriate given their collective focus on open social scholarship and the publicly-funded nature of the project at large. The overall aim of the Wikipedia Engagement Project was to mobilize the knowledge created by a delineated team by engaging on an open platform, thereby working to understand how best to expand the audience and impact potential of their shared research.

Notably, this project was the first instance of either group working in this way, i.e., the large scale, continuous editing and enhancing of popular encyclopedia pages on the Wikipedia platform. Despite the team having

previous experience with Wikibooks, this initiative highlighted unique Wikipedia challenges. As with many exploratory digital humanities projects, the Wikipedia Engagement Project was primarily defined by its productive failure – in particular the discovery of some the pragmatic pitfalls of crossing between traditional, closed publication and public-facing, open scholarship. In the end, it was the iterative, persistent efforts of the two ETCL graduate research assistants that resulted in a more nuanced understanding of how to best share knowledge in the Wikipedia environment. In what follows, we present our experience as an open and transparent narrative in order to share lessons learned with others who may be considering similar engagements.

As previously mentioned, the Wikipedia Engagement Project was primarily carried out by two graduate research assistants under the supervision of the ETCL's assistant director of operations. The graduate research assistants worked in a research-writing rotation: spending one week reading INKE research on specific topics followed by a second week spent adding references to Wikipedia where pertinent and appropriate. The initial implementation of this workflow was quite smooth; however, after the first round of edits, most of the graduate research assistants' work was reverted (i.e., undone by other editors on the Wikipedia platform) due to a perceived conflict of interest. The edits were reverted by a more senior Wikipedia member (with "extended confirmed" user status) with an edit count of over 61,000, at the time of the incident. While Wikipedia is often thought of as egalitarian and non-hierarchical (cf. Sanger 2009: 52), there are community roles and power structures that dictate participation. As newcomers to Wikipedia, the graduate research assistants lacked an established profile and, therefore, sat at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy.

The reason for the reversions was that the contributions made by the graduate research assistants were perceived to be in violation of Wikipedia's content policies regarding neutral point of view (NPOV) and no original research (NOR). NPOV refers to the author's perspective on and relationship to the content, in particular "representing fairly, proportionately, and, as far as possible, without editorial bias, all of the significant views that have been published by reliable sources on a topic" (Wikipedia 2019b). On the other hand, the NOR mandate states that "Wikipedia article must not contain original research" or ideas for which "no reliable, published sources exist" (Wikipedia 2019c). Because the graduate research assistants were adding references to original work carried out by their

colleagues, their edits were deemed inappropriate for Wikipedia according to the NPOV and NOR policies by the specific user who had reverted their work.

Limiting the participation of individual scholars who are endeavoring to add reliable contributions seems antithetical to the idea of Wikipedia as a digital encyclopedia of all collected knowledge. Wikipedia could benefit greatly from the content expertise offered by academic researchers. However, it is also understandable why the tenets of NPOV and NOR are critical to maintaining the integrity of Wikipedia and preventing biased rhetoric or "shameless self-promotion" (Logan et al. 2010: 2). In the end, what we determined as the most reasonable way forward – and the consensus on Wikipedia, in consultation with other editors – is that references to one's work are acceptable if they are measured, relevant, and within reason (cf. Wikipedia 2019a). The issue at hand in the case of the Wikipedia Engagement Project was that at least one editor found the references to be excessive, and that editor had much more control in the system due to their user status.

Despite the challenges of this pilot project, the ETCL team has found several positive ways to work with Wikipedia and other Wikimedia projects, including publishing a Wikibooks edition of the Devonshire Manuscript, creating the Honorary Resident Wikipedian program, and developing the Open Knowledge Practicum Program. Each of these efforts will be featured in succession below, demonstrating that while the relationship between academia and Wikipedia can sometimes be complicated and controversial, it also provides the potential for fruitful, cross-community knowledge sharing.

3 Initiative 2: Wikibooks Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript

A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript is an edition of a 16th century verse miscellany published on the Wikibooks platform.[1] The Devonshire Manuscript is an important piece of literary history, as it represents the first preserved instance of men and women writing together in a coterie. Directed by Dr. Ray Siemens, this project grew out of a desire to share a decidedly academic edition with a much wider audience – including enthusiasts and para-academics. Working under Siemens's direction, members

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[1] A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript is available at https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/The_Devonshire_Manuscript.

of the ETCL – namely Constance Crompton, Daniel J. Powell, Alyssa Arbuckle, and Alyssa McLeod – iterated a previous electronic edition of the work into its Wikibook manifestation. The Wikibook includes many of the features one would expect from a standard scholarly edition: it contains both an editorial and textual introduction, appendices, genealogical tables, and paleographic information. But it has one key difference from its more traditional counterparts: *A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript* is available online, open access, and is not only free to anyone to read but also free to anyone to edit.
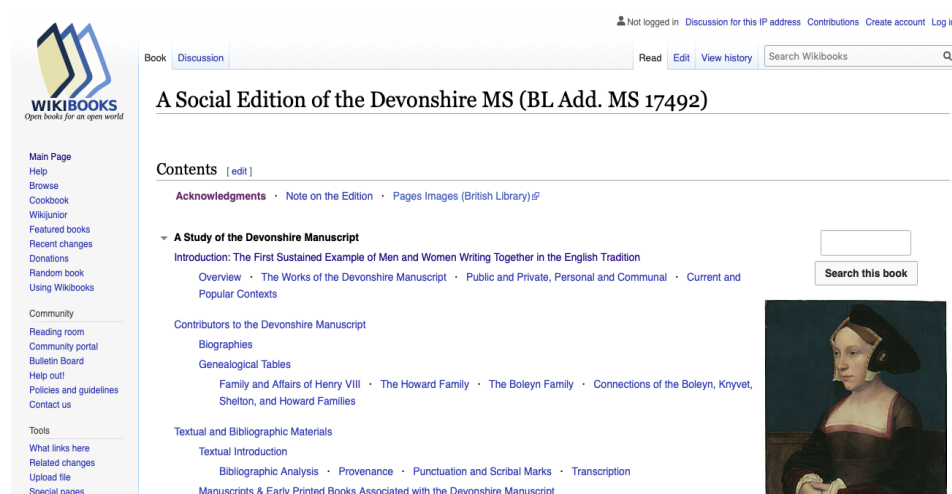
Figure 1: Table of Contents Page for Wikibooks "A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript" (Wikibooks Contributors 2020).

The openness of this project was startling, at first, to those who were not accustomed to seeing their academic work so freely distributed as well as so open for social participation. As stated in the prefatory note for the edition, "[t]he social edition is a work that brings communities together to engage in conversation around a text formed and reformed through an ongoing, iterative, public editorial process" (Wikibooks Contributors 2014) – a process not unlike the many-handed creation of the original Devonshire Manuscript itself. But it was this very focus on conversation and multiple community engagement that was a sticking point for some, and concerns were voiced regarding vandalism and accreditation. In order to assuage these concerns, the ETCL team put a mechanism in place to monitor the online edition for attacks. Although every Wikipedia editor's contribution to a page is already recorded via Wikipedia's own minute versioning system, we also implemented a system where edits are visualized by an

automatically generated pie chart linked to in the "Discussion" section of each page of the book.
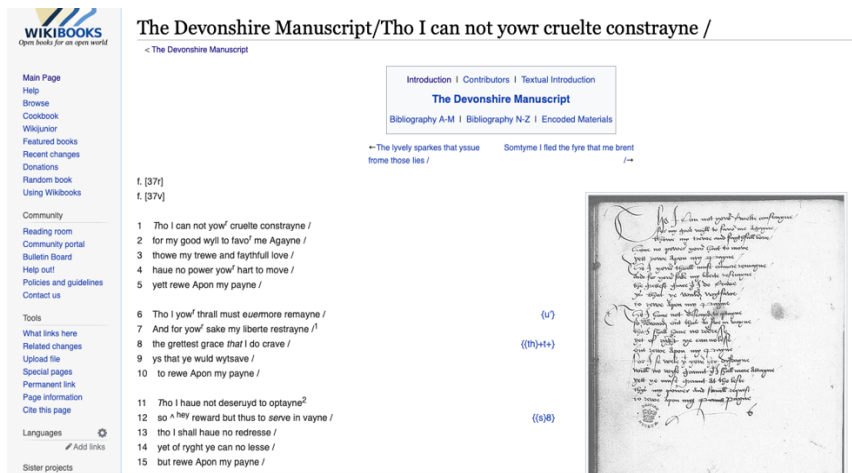

Figure 2: Content Page for Wikibooks "A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript" (Wikibooks Contributors 2020).

A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript is a testament to the possibilities of creating knowledge in more open, and more social, spaces. The Wikibook – and corresponding Twitter presence – has been engaged with by many individuals who do not self-identify as academics but rather as community members with a sincere interest in 16th century Tudor culture. These individuals have communicated with the Devonshire Manuscript Editorial Group on Twitter, added edits and images to the Wikibook, and monitored the Wikibook for potential vandalism. Such a project reinforces the importance of exploring open scholarship projects, regardless of the challenges that might come along with working in such an unconventional way.

4 Initiative 3: Honorary Resident Wikipedian

A partnered initiative – primarily with UVic Libraries, as well as with INKE and the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences – the Honorary Resident Wikipedian program began in 2014. This program facilitates an open scholarship expert sharing their knowledge on the UVic campus twice a year via dedicated talks and an accompanying Wikipedia edit-a-thon. The Honorary Resident Wikipedian appointment grew out of the ETCL and UVic Libraries' shared interest in developing programming that could bridge academic and non-academic communities. Indeed, various students, librarians, faculty, academic staff, and community members

have participated in edit-a-thons held at the UVic Libraries. Christian Vandendorpe, a Professor Emeritus from University of Ottawa, served in this role from 2014-16, and Constance Crompton, Canada Research Chair in Digital Humanities at the University of Ottawa, served from 2017-18. Erin Glass, Digital Scholarship Librarian at University of California San Diego, served from 2019-20, and Silvia Gutiérrez De la Torre, Digital Humanities Librarian at the Daniel Cosío Villegas Library at El Colegio de México in Mexico City, is the Honorary Resident Wikipedian for 2020-21.

The Honorary Resident Wikipedian program has seen prominent uptake in the local media. The Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) interviewed Vandendorpe upon his appointment. When asked how he would convince fellow academics of the merits of engaging with Wikipedia Vandendorpe answered,

> I don't tell them to abandon their general work and research, but to share their research online with open access so that people can use it to add to Wikipedia. Secondly, professors have a responsibility toward the public good. And they have interest that their discipline be known correctly by the general public. (CBC 2015).

Vandendorpe expands on the notion of an academic's responsibility to the public good in a subsequent *University Affairs* article, where he states "[b]y contributing to Wikipedia and by nurturing this important sector of the knowledge ecosystem, academics serve both the public good and their disciplines, sharing their interests in the meme pool of culture" (Vandendorpe 2015).[2] The second Honorary Resident Wikipedian, Crompton, took up the thread of academic engagement during her tenure in this role. For instance, during Open Access Week 2018, Crompton gave a free, public talk titled "Donating and Developing: Contributing to Wikipedia to Make a Better Web", where she extolled the various features of the Wikimedia suite of projects for contributing to and cleaning up publicly available data. Recently, the ETCL and UVic Libraries have taken the Wikipedia conversations and training off campus. In collaboration with Glass in 2020, we worked with off-campus partners in the Victoria GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) community to organize a community Wikipedia edit-a-thon at Point Ellice House, a local historic house museum, an event that was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have since adapted the program, and hosted Gutiérrez for a virtual free,

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2 Please see https://etcl.uvic.ca/hrw/ for additional media coverage on Vandendorpe.

public talk and Wikipedia edit-a-thon. The Honorary Resident Wikipedian program serves as an effective outreach mechanism whereby those within, besides, and beyond the academic structure can take part in socially creating knowledge.

5 Initiative 4: Open Knowledge Practicum Program

After the series of theoretical and practical engagements with open scholarship outlined above, the ETCL, in partnership with UVic Libraries and the Faculty of Humanities, launched the Open Knowledge Program. The Open Knowledge Program invites university and community members and attendees at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) to participate in a variety of the ETCL's open initiatives. Motivated by a desire to make the physical space of the lab more accessible to researchers who share in the ETCL's mission to cultivate "the practices and values of open scholarship" (Electronic Textual Cultures Lab 2018), the program serves as an incubator for projects and assists fellows by offering designated workstations, colleague consultation, skills training, and project planning and management support.

Launched in 2017 and counting over 30 alumni, the Open Knowledge Practicum (OKP) – the first initiative in the program – hosts fellows in the lab for three hours a week and is aligned with standard academic terms, with the average practicum ranging between one and two terms. OKP projects do not adhere to a specific format; rather, participants are encouraged to make knowledge in their field accessible through an open format best suited for their unique work. Additionally, fellows contribute research outcomes to Wikipedia and other Wikimedia projects. Our motivation to contribute to Wikipedia is shared with Vandendorpe (2015), who emphasizes the importance of doing our part to make Wikipedia a reliable resource for researchers and members of the public alike. Since Wikipedia is so widely used, contributing research makes knowledge openly available to users on a platform they already use, in a way that they are most likely to find it.

To date, participant contributions to Wikipedia have been of varying degrees. Some fellows choose to enrich existing articles by adding more references, copyediting, or adding sections to existing topics; others remedy gaps in the knowledge base by creating new articles altogether. For example, 2018 OKP fellow and UVic philosophy graduate student Harris Watt created a Wikipedia article for Charles Arthur Campbell, a prominent

twentieth-century philosopher who contributed to the development of metaphysical philosophy. Watt found that there was a lack of online, open access scholarship detailing Campbell's work. Over the course of the term, Watt developed and published a Wikipedia page detailing Campbell's biography and main philosophical doctrines; he also managed to track down and make openly available the only known photograph of Campbell. UVic Victoria English graduate student Caroline Winter created Wikipedia articles for five short stories by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and contributed to a sixth, and linked these pages to a digital scholarly edition of the stories created during an OKP in 2017. Another substantial contribution to Wikipedia was made by UVic Libraries subject librarian Ying Liu in 2018-19. Liu created an article on *The New Republic* newspaper (1911-84), one of the longest-running Chinese newspapers in North America. The Wikipedia article outlines the history of *The New Republic* and highlights its contribution to our understanding of the progression of Chinese immigrant communities in Canada, their political affiliations and relationships with other Canadian ethnic communities, and their response to major worldwide political and economic developments over the better part of the 20th century. All of the contributions to Wikipedia made through the OKP, including these three articles, have made research openly available to read and edit by Wikipedia users all over the world, and all have engaged in the encyclopedia's process of open social knowledge creation.

Figure 3: Wikipedia Page for Charles Arthur Campbell (Wikipedia Contributors 2018).
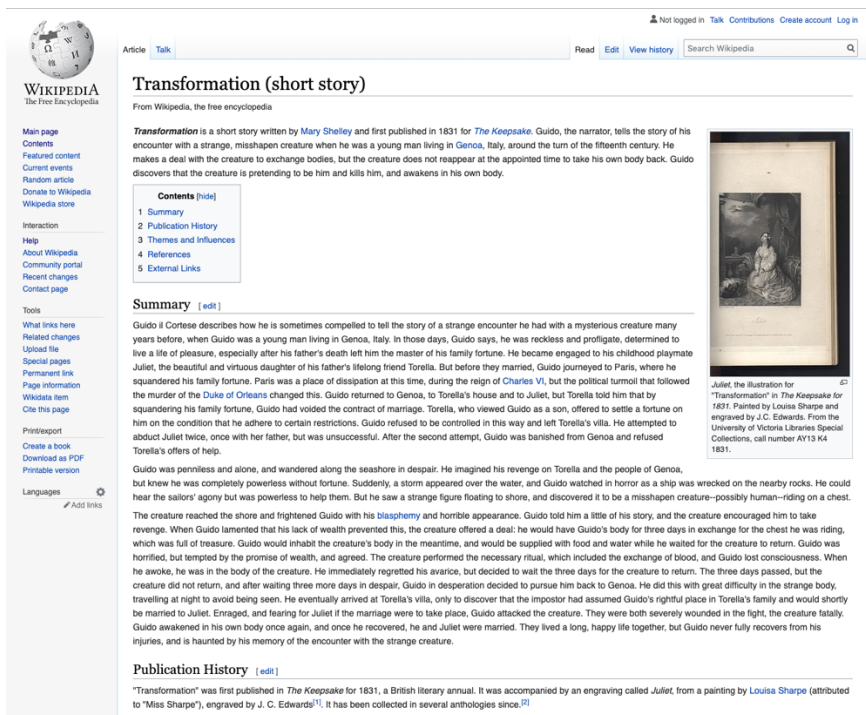
Figure 4: Wikipedia Page for Mary Shelley's "Transformation" (Wikipedia Contributors 2019b).
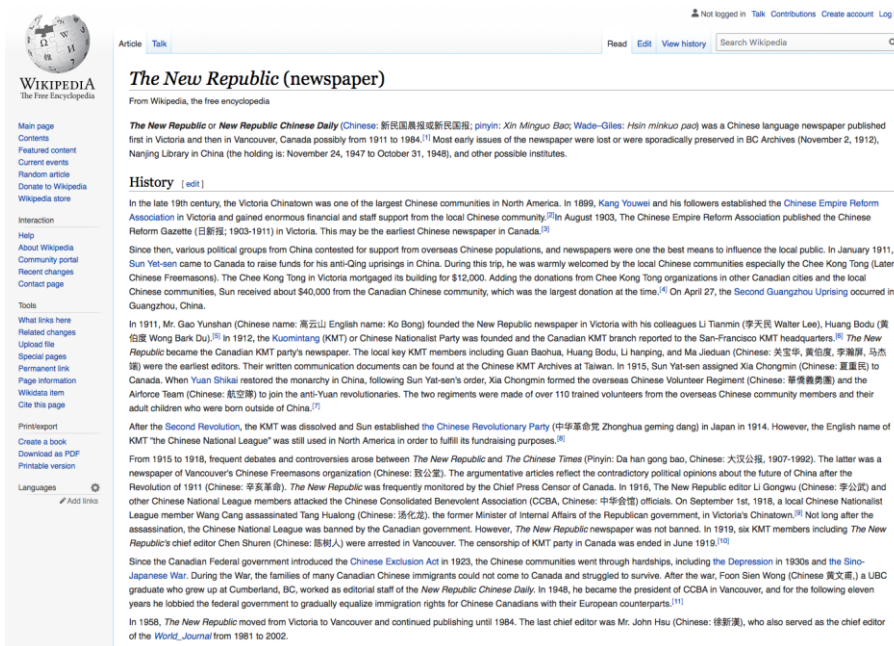

Figure 5: Wikipedia Page for The New Republic newspaper Wikipedia Contributors 2019a).

Through the Open Knowledge Practicum, researchers affiliated with the ETCL are trained to contribute their expertise to Wikimedia projects. In turn, they can encourage other academic and citizen scholars to join the

open knowledge movement. In addition to the term-long Open Knowledge Practicum, the Open Knowledge Program includes the Open Knowledge Practicum at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (OKP@DHSI) and the Open Knowledge Residency. The OKP@DHSI is a more condensed version of the practicum that takes place over three days before the annual institute and is open to all DHSI attendees and instructors. The most recent initiative, the Open Knowledge Residency, is a one-week, intensive program for graduate students at UVic to develop an aspect of their thesis or dissertation in the ETCL and share research findings in open access venues, including Wikipedia.

6 Conclusion

In his monograph *A Social History of Language: From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia*, Peter Burke (2012: 274) argues that Wikipedia offers a "vivid example" of reflexivity through its ability to enact self-criticism, impose revision, facilitate discussions, and allow knowledge to be socially situated. Our own experiences working with Wikipedia in an academic context have demonstrated the importance of iteration: the willingness to react, recalibrate, and restart. Such reflexivity has been crucial for the ETCL's intellectual engagement with the concept of open scholarship and the possibilities of socially creating knowledge. The Wikipedia Engagement Pilot project presented a critical learning experience for our research team and educated us on the affordances, boundaries, and community practices of Wikipedia. This understanding has been deepened through the leadership of Vandendorpe, Crompton, Glass and now Gutiérrez in their roles as Honorary Resident Wikipedians. The *Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript* marked a key moment of extended Wikipedia engagement for the ETCL, and modeled for our wider academic community how open knowledge platforms can be used to circulate scholarship and encourage the participation of broad, diverse publics. Our efforts have continued and have grown exponentially in the creation and success of the Open Knowledge Practicum Program, which is already in its fourth year. Overall, as each of these various projects demonstrate, Wikipedia offers the members of our research collective an opportunity to connect with varied publics over the creation and dissemination of knowledge, thereby facilitating a more robust community of engaged and informed global citizens.

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