Class Project: Addressing Gender Bias on Wikipedia

By Meg Heckman

Meg Heckman is an assistant professor of journalism and media innovation at Northeastern University and the 2021-2022 chair of AEJMC's Commission on the Status of Women.

A project called Women Do News is working to close Wikipedia's persistent gender gap, and, as my journalism students and I learned last year, it's easy to get involved.

Wikipedia is a free, online encyclopedia maintained by volunteers who aim to share "the sum of all knowledge," but its well-documented gender bias means many notable women, including journalists, are underrepresented.

A number of efforts have emerged to tackle this problem by organizing events called edit-a-thons that train participants in the intricacies of Wikipedia while writing entries for overlooked women. Among these is Women Do News, a collaborative that has spent the last several years working to elevate "the voices and profiles of women journalists online." When I learned about them last summer, I volunteered to help by assigning Wikipedia editing tasks to students in my Gender in the Newsroom course at Northeastern University.

The class met in a hybrid format during the fall of 2020, with some students attending in person in Boston and others Zooming in from around the world. This created challenges for interactive assignments, but Wikipedia editing proved to be the kind of project that works reasonably well across distances and time zones. It also gave students a chance to help remedy some of the gender inequities they were learning about in class while practicing the research and writing skills they were learning in their reporting workshops.

My own Wikipedia editing experience was fairly limited, but the team at Women Do News provided me with helpful tip sheets and templates to share with my students. I supplemented those with other Wikipedia-related materials from our campus library and the web. The class was enthusiastic, but the research was often slow going, largely because of the systemic underrepresentation of notable women in the source material commonly used for Wikipedia citations (Wagner et al., 2016). We were, however, able to supplement a few existing articles and contribute to new ones for several nota-ble journalists, including Betsy Wade, who was one of the key plaintiffs in a landmark gender discrimination lawsuit against the New York Times, Elizabeth Boylan, et al, v. The New York Times.

Helping to create these entries was a bright spot in an otherwise difficult semester, but my students' struggle to find source material was also a reminder that, as Eckert and Steiner (2013) put it, "The internet is not free of 'real' world hierarchies." As a result, adding new biographies of women journalists isn't enough to close Wikipedia's gender gap (for more on this, see Tripodi, 2021). We must also take our activism offline and combat the tendency to devalue women's professional contributions by advocating for their inclusion in newsrooms, at industry events (no more manels!) and in the stories journalists tell about our society. To learn more, go to womendonews.org.

References

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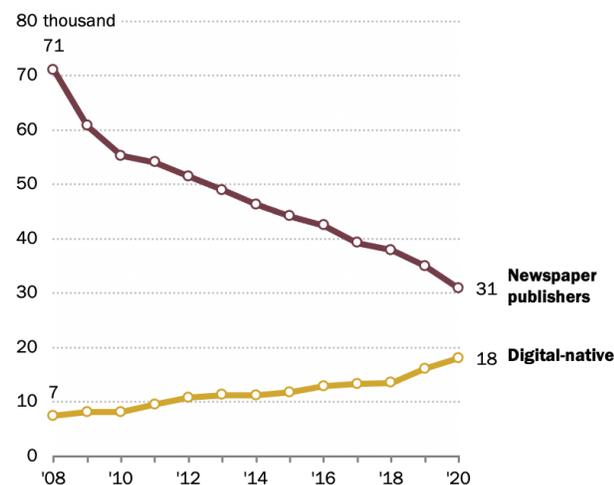
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Newsroom employment at U.S. newspapers has plummeted since 2008 but grown at digital publishers

Number of U.S. newsroom employees by news industry, in thousands

Note: The OEWS survey is designed to produce estimates by combining data collected over a three-year period. Newsroom employees include news analysts, reporters and journalists; editors; photographers; and television, video and film camera operators and editors. Digital-native sector data is based on "other information services" industry code, whose largest segment is "internet publishing and broadcasting and web search portals."
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics data.

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