

New Maps for an Inclusive Wikipedia: Decolonial Scholarship and Strategies to Counter Systemic Bias

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Abstract: Since early in the development of the project, Wikipedia editors have been concerned with overcoming “systemic biases” in coverage of the world’s knowledge, especially those rooted in forms of social marginalization. Major campaigns within the Wikipedia community attempt to reverse these disparities, largely by focusing on addressing “gaps” in the demographics of Wikipedia editors and by writing new articles about people and topics overlooked by the encyclopedia. However, many Wikipedia editors and observers have argued that the systemic biases of Wikipedia are inherent to current global distribution of knowledge production, and can only be overcome by changing the encyclopedia’s standards of inclusion.

This article reframes this debate by comparing the project of “countering systemic bias” on Wikipedia with the effort within Western/Northern academia to decolonize and diversify scholarship. Since this project began at least fifty years ago, it has led to abundant peer-reviewed scholarship, all of which qualifies as “reliable sources” for Wikipedia articles. Anthropological scholarship has also overturned the social evolutionary narrative that often shapes popular perceptions of global history. The article proposes that critical scholarship, historical maps, and maps in contemporary scholarship can all contribute to addressing Wikipedia’s systemic biases.

Keywords: Wikipedia; diversity; crisis in anthropology; knowledge equity; systemic bias; indigenous history; race; social evolution

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Introduction

In 2005, Wikipedia—which would later become the largest ever encyclopedia project—had just created a web homepage that offered visitors a choice of languages, thereby re-centering English from the default. And I had decided to edit Wikipedia for the first time. Like many new users of Wikipedia, I arrived with curiosity about the possibilities of the project and skepticism about its potential. The most obvious problem was this: how can the Wikipedia community fairly and accurately represent all human knowledge when they are such an unrepresentative sample? Can it truly become an encyclopedia for all of humanity? And if not, was it a wise place to spend my time and effort?

Early in my life as an online editor, one tiny episode in the growth of English Wikipedia confirmed that capacity, and convinced me that the project had the wisdom to fulfill its mission. It happened on the article page named “Java.” On September 12, 2005, the page on English Wikipedia referred to the Indonesian island. The next day, it referred to the programming language developed by Sun Microsystems, with a “see also” note referring the island. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the English language portion of the Internet of 2005, “Java” was being used as search term most often for the programming language and not the island, on which Indonesia’s capital city of Jakarta sits and over 120 million people lived. Utilizing the site’s open-to-all suite of tools and following the admonition to “act boldly,” one editor had switched the page. And so began one of thousands of Wikipedia debates about something that seems like minutiae, but is also a very serious question.

The debate raged through several procedural steps and at least 129 different interventions. Wikipedia editors observed, among other things:

- “I don’t know of a single person who is familiar with the island.”
- “We’re writing an encyclopedia for the whole world, not just for [Information Technology] workers.”
- “Well, not to be racist, but much of Java is fairly poor and probably without Internet access. (Feel free to reprimand/lynch me if I’m wrong). And we’re forgetting about the slang term for coffee; that’s probably more well known than the island.”
- “Are the 250 million inhabitants of Indonesia not ‘people’? There are quite likely more people in Indonesia with Internet access than have ever heard of Java as a programming language.” (“Talk,” 2018)

Underlying this debate was a question of direction: are *Wikipedians* building an encyclopedia by and for the Internet and the Internet-connected world? Or are we building an encyclopedia for the 7-billion-and-rising humans on the planet? Ultimately, the community discussion maintained the centrality of the island, and I stayed and became a Wikipedian.

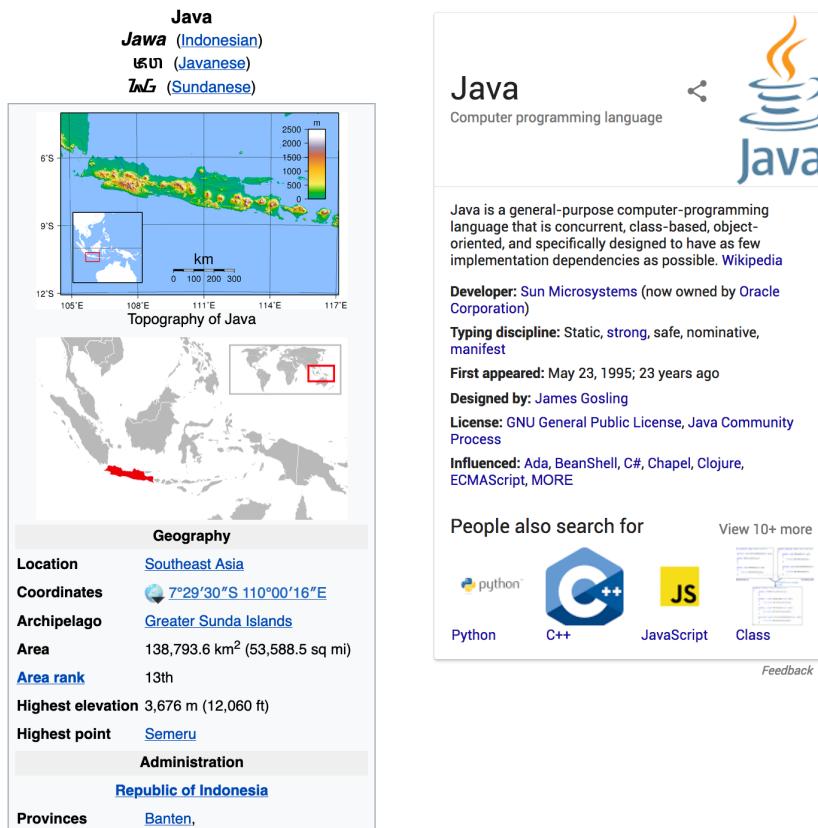


Figure 1. “Java” as represented in a Wikipedia infobox (left) and by the Google Knowledge Engine structured data box (right) as of 2019.

The search result for Java is iconic of Wikipedia’s identity and mission, setting it sharply apart from the other nine of the top-ten most trafficked websites in the world, led by Google, whose search function and knowledge graph both first direct users to Java, the programming language.

As a mission-driven, volunteer-produced information resource hosted by a non-profit foundation, Wikipedia is an anomaly among leading web domains. Yet it may also be the website that best enacts the hypertext-based dream envisioned by the creators of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee et al., 1992). Wikipedians have long been aware of the systemic underrepresentation of certain kinds of people, both among editors and other participants in the project and in the knowledge shared within the encyclopedia itself (Ayers et al., 2008, pp. 353–361). This self-conscious awareness was absolutely essential if a small, start-up electronic community was to come together and provide a platform for accessing “the sum of all human knowledge,” as proposed by the site’s founders (Wales, 2004). There was a fundamental mismatch between the project’s ultimate audience—a large fraction of humanity altogether—and the much more restricted set of collaborators involved with its construction. Countless choices would have to be made to ensure that the interests, needs, and realities of that global audience would direct the project’s evolution, rather than the preconceptions, common sense, and sometime limited knowledge of the founding Wikipedia community. Then, even more than now, the community was demographically unrepresentative of humanity: overwhelmingly male, more resident in the global North, more computer-literate, more Euro-

American, wealthier, and also more formally educated,¹ more often Christian or religiously unaffiliated, overwhelmingly male, and skeptical of collective social statuses.² These imbalances filter into Wikipedia's policies, community interactions, and collective culture in ways that maintain and amplify disparities in participation and content (Ford & Wajcman, 2017; Gallert & Van der Velden, 2013; Graells-Garrido et al., 2015; Koerner, 2018).

With this mismatch comes a challenge. Only if the community continually reminds itself of its own idiosyncrasies—and makes efforts to overcome them—can it rise to the challenge of envisioning a future that is valuable to humanity as a whole. Within the Wikipedia editing community, this challenge is known by the term “Countering Systemic Bias,” the name of one of scores of WikiProjects set up to coordinate editing to achieve common goals.³ Inside the Wikimedia Foundation, this effort is part of the long-term strategic goal of “knowledge equity,” which prioritizes “the knowledge and communities that have been left out by structures of power and privilege” (*Strategy/Wikimedia Movement/2017*, 2017).

Systemic bias limits Wikipedia's completeness and quality of coverage of people with marginalized identities. It also diminishes marginalized people's role in the larger historical and social entities, and often distorts the role they did play. As such, any systemic bias based on social marginalization—which may occur along the lines of gender, race, language, sexuality, disability or other status—requires a multifaceted campaign to write the affected people back into the world's largest encyclopedia. Moreover, since “Wikipedia is now a *de facto* global reference of dynamic knowledge” (Graham, 2011, p. 269) and “the most widely read work of digital history” (Rosenzweig, 2006, p. 119), the ways that people, events, and places are represented within the encyclopedia is significant and consequential.

This article, based on a speech given at the 2019 Worlds of Wikimedia conference in Sydney, Australia, argues that ongoing conversations within the academy can make valuable contributions to the work of countering and overcoming systemic bias on Wikipedia and related knowledge projects. I write this article from the vantage point of an anthropology professor within the North American academy who periodically uses Wikipedia as a teaching tool in my classes. I direct my assignments in those classes towards expanding and improving Wikipedia in ways that counter systemic bias and communicate academically-established knowledge about power, inequality, social movements and indigenous peoples.

Here, I'm more narrowly describing a sweet spot of systemic bias: where popular narratives and the current iterations of Wikipedia articles exclude or misrepresent marginalized peoples, but where extant scholarship offers a different

¹ A 2018 Wikimedia Foundation survey found 90% of contributors were male, 9% female, and 1% other. 81% were from the Global north and 85% have post-secondary education, with median education level being completion of a first university degree (Wikimedia Foundation, 2018). English Wikipedians were 14% female and 77% holders of a university degree. See also (Livingstone, 2010; “Wikipedia,” 2009).

² I have personally observed frequent religious unaffiliation, claimed distancing from racial identity, and skepticism of collective social statuses throughout my fourteen years of editing Wikipedia. For debates in which Wikipedians conflate religious identity with bias, see the debates on depictions of Muhammed (Niesyto, 2011; Tkacz, 2015, p. 64ff), essays cited by Ayers (2008, p. 358), and comments such as “Usually religion is both irrelevant and contentious” in on-Wiki debates (“Wikipedia,” 2016).

³ Direct analogues to the WikiProject Countering Systemic Bias appear on the Arabic, Dutch, German, and Serbian Wikipedias.

and more informative view. First I argue that, due to long-term parallel efforts within numerous academic disciplines to overcome the same kind of systemic biases identified on Wikipedia, this arena of potential improvement is massive. In the next section, I describe how valid critiques of imbalances in scholarship have informed discussions of systemic bias on Wikipedia. Next, I consider historical metanarratives as structuring frames that introduce bias into historical accounts, and describe how classroom assignments can detect and challenge such bias. Fourth, I look at how both old and new maps can render indigenous and marginalized peoples more visible. The takeaway is that there are a variety of strategies that draw upon academic knowledge to counter systemic bias on Wikipedia, and these can be scaled up through editor initiative, classroom assignments, and campaigns. In the concluding section, I situate the project of decolonizing and depatriarchalizing Wikipedia as a multiphase project that has important steps ahead of it.

In the course of this argument, I challenge the conventional wisdom within Wikipedia and outside of it that social marginalization is so pervasive that overcoming systemic bias must begin by altering the epistemic standards of the encyclopedia. Instead, I argue, the intellectual spadework around representing marginalized communities is well advanced, and Wikipedians and academics who orchestrate participation in Wikipedia editing have a unique opportunity to advance the project of overcoming systemic bias. We can most fruitfully do so by importing knowledge about marginalized people from its influential, but socially obscure, place in the research agendas of academics to mass distribution by way of public-facing internet projects like Wikipedia.

What the “crisis in anthropology” signals about how to confront systemic bias

The starting point of this article is recognizing that the problem of challenging systemic bias is not an issue confined to Wikipedia, but is instead an ongoing process across all formal systems of knowledge production and distribution—including the media (Dines & Humez, 2003), the arts (Dymond, 2019), pop culture (Yuen, 2016), and the academy—in what can either be called the West or the global North. This process has gone forward under the banners of diversity and decolonization, deconstructing the formerly restrictive boundaries of gender, race, and nationality over the past century.

Let me take my own discipline—anthropology, the study of human culture—as an example. It is hyper relevant for Wikipedia’s project that anthropology devotes much of its scholarly investigation to non-Western and non-state societies. So alongside teaching certain methods for digging up artefacts or encountering community life in far off places, we also act as the gateway to a large part of the ancient and contemporary world. Every other spring, I teach graduate students the history of the discipline since around 1960, and that history is marked by a profound series of crises. Whereas in the middle decades of the twentieth century, anthropologists produced comprehensive books claiming to fully document the life of a people, and aspired to unite them in complete theories of mythology and kinship, or to set human cultural evolution into a single story driven by intensifying use of the land and energy, by the end of the crisis the authority of the ethnographer and the validity of such overarching studies would be thrown radically into question. Why did this happen?

First, the discipline had a serious reckoning with its own frequently cozy relationship with colonial power. Second, many of the people who had been merely objects of study for anthropology increasingly emerged as critical readers of the discipline's writing. Third, an intellectual revolution led the social sciences to begin studying themselves as culturally situated efforts whose truth claims engaged authoritative use of language rather than genuine certainty. And fourth, the diversification of the academy along the lines of gender, race, sexuality, and nationality accelerated all these trends. Anthropologists realized that too often they were writing a portrayal of "the Maasai" or "the Zuni" that denied historical change, erased the presence and influence of colonial power structures, failed to hear the voices of women, and located peoples in schema that may not have applied to them.

Landmark works in this process of disciplinary rethinking include: Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Deloria, 1969), which critiques anthropologists' unbalanced relationship with their Native American research subjects;⁴ *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Asad, 1973), which reflects on intellectual or practical collaboration with colonial power structures; *Nature, Culture and Gender* (MacCormack & Strathern, 1980), which addressed the role gender in anthropology and foregrounded women's ethnographic work that had been marginalized within the anthropological canon; and *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith, 2012), a non-anthropological text that offers a broad epistemic critique of social science research methodologies and offers proposals for developing a fundamentally different and less power-laden relationship between researchers and the communities that they study. Now this should sound like a thoroughgoing attempt to uproot and correct systemic bias in the discipline, because that's exactly what it was.

These earthquakes within anthropology are the symptoms of wider tectonic shifts across the portion of the academy that studies human life. Historians, sociologists, literary scholars, art historians and more all had their crises of representation that urged diversification of viewpoints and called widely accepted master narratives into question. It also led to the invention of new disciplines: women's and gender studies, ethnic studies, indigenous studies, indigenous traditional knowledge, and a radical rethinking of area studies. Now, over three decades have passed since all of these critiques were put on the table. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam refer to this as "the scholarly wing" of "the seismic shift" in power relations represented by decolonization (Stam & Shohat, 2012, p. 75). Which is to say that the academy's own program of countering systemic bias, has to greater or lesser degree, framed the research of an entire generation of scholars.

And here, there is direct potential to change this conversation on Wikipedia. Academics' productive life is centered on producing peer-reviewed scholarship. Meanwhile, Wikipedia's filtering system for knowledge centers on identifying and citing "reliable sources." They are the grist for the collective mill that is Wikipedia. And from the beginning, Wikipedia policy has prioritized peer-reviewed scholarship. It's no longer the case that the lesser visibility of certain peoples in dominant narratives presages a general lack of high-quality sourced information about them.

⁴ A generation later, the effects of this critique were still rippling through archaeology and cultural anthropology (Biolsi & Zimmerman, 1997).

Understanding systemic bias on Wikipedia

Much of the conversation about countering systemic bias on Wikipedia seeks to explain how these biases emerged organically within the encyclopedia. To do so, it draws on the quantitative imbalances in the demography of Wikipedia editors (Ford & Wajcman, 2017) and in the production of knowledge. There are real and substantial biases that skew the geography of Wikipedia knowledge production. For example, the United States, European Union, and Japan accounted for 49.6% of the authorship of scientific and engineering articles published in peer-reviewed journals in 2016, but make up only 13% of the world's population (National Science Board, 2018). The global circulation of knowledge is highly uneven, as illustrated by Shahar Ronen and colleagues in their analysis of global networks of translation, which "center on English as a global hub," and peripheralize all but a handful of languages (Ronen et al., 2014, p. E5616). If the broad distribution of reliably-sourced information is biased, it is argued, then Wikipedia will naturally and organically reflect that bias in its coverage. As Wikimedia Foundation Executive Director Katherine Maher tweeted in 2018, "We're a mirror of the world's biases, not the source of them. We can't write articles about what you don't cover."⁵

Many advocates of challenging bias thus focus on the ways that Wikipedia policies and standards can perpetuate bias. This includes conversations about the difficulty of sourcing indigenous knowledge (Gallert & van der Velden, 2015) oral sources and traditions ("Wikipedia Talk," 2017), and other marginalized participants in the global cultural conversation. Peter Gallert and Maja van der Velden (2015, p. 118) argue, that "If the rules are meticulously followed, IK [Indigenous Knowledge] cannot be represented on Wikipedia; the rules need to be bent or changed if IK is to be included." Likewise Jackie Koerner (2019) writes, "knowledge from published, written materials with a preference toward academic and peer-reviewed publications epitomizes reliability. ... The way the current reliable sources policy is written and followed leads to an information imbalance on Wikipedia."

Many public⁶ discussions about systemic bias on Wikipedia become polarized by this focus on the rules of Wikipedia. During the 2017 Wikimedia movement strategy process, for instance, a challenge posed to all Wiki projects asked, "How could we capture the sum of all knowledge when much of it cannot be verified in traditional ways?" By focusing on the ways that inequity in knowledge on Wikipedia requires changing the rules, many English Wikipedians came to the conclusion that "This is explicitly out of scope" (a comment hyperlinked to the No Original Research policy), "This could work but it could not be Wikipedia," or "Unless we want to ruin Wikipedia, this is absolutely unacceptable to accommodate" ("Wikipedia Talk," 2017).⁷

My purpose in this article is to offer a counter-narrative: Firstly, that the process of decentering narratives and experience of the powerful and privileged, is

⁵ This quote from Maher (2018) directly addresses journalists, but she extends the critique to "curators, academics, grantmakers, prize-awarding committees, and all other gatekeepers" in her next tweet.

⁶ By public, I mean conversations that are addressed to a broad audience of Wikipedia editors rather than those taking place within forums specifically focused on the work of countering bias.

⁷ Responses from community members of 27 Wikipedia project communities are summarized in (*Strategy/Wikimedia Movement/2017/Sources/Cycle_3/Final_Summary_by_Language*, 2017) https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Strategy/Wikimedia_movement/2017/Sources/Cycle_3/Final_summary_by_language

not just beginning and that the intellectual work that's involved in it is widely shared. That is, our analysis of the systemic biases in academia and publication should not be overstated as if they completely silenced broad areas of knowledge. Secondly, in terms of putting knowledge on Wikipedia we have information that meets the gold standard of reliable sourcing available to do the work of countering systemic bias. By discovering a project of countering systemic bias within academia, we encounter bits of treasure that can transform Wikipedia.

Still, I would argue, there is a gulf between dominant narratives of social life – produced in the academy before the crisis and still circulating in grade-school textbooks, popular narratives, and the common sense of editors – and the major results of published scholarship. That is, the intellectual spadework of producing an up-to-date encyclopaedia, at least in the study of peoples, cultures, and history, is also the work of replacing overarching master narratives with the inclusive reality of human diversity.

In the following two sections of this article, I will propose productive interventions to do just that in terms of time (history) and then in terms of space (geography).

Metanarratives: What is our map for time? ... or, a word about Western Civilization

Within the structure of many encyclopedia articles there is, in narrative form, a map for time and the sequence of human cultures, civilizations, and technologies.⁸ Anthropologists, historians, and other social scientists were responsible for shaping this map, which Daniel Segal (2000) calls the “long chronology.” The long chronology is conventionally presented as a sequence of stages of biological, cultural, and technological advances, often propelled forward by a series of “revolutions.” By putting them into a common narrative, the long chronology concatenates the narratives of biological evolution, anthropological stages of culture, and the “story of civilization” into a one long story that begins with unicellular life and ends in the space age. Each story is one of upward progress towards a single, contemporary (and perhaps self-centered) ideal: evolution towards *Homo sapiens*, technological advance towards modern civilization, and cultural change that culminates in the West.

Anthropologists, geographers, and philosophers narrated world history around the terms “savage,” “barbarian,” and “civilized” peoples. In other words, nineteenth-century social scientists created a dominant mapping of human history simply by accepting the ethnocentric perspective of states and empires (Scott, 2009, pp. 98–126), up to and including highly derogatory terms, as valid scientific concepts. G.F. Hegel incorporated this narrative into his philosophy of history: World history, he wrote, “travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely “the end of History”:

Westerners are “that people who actually are the carriers of the world Spirit.” Meanwhile, Jews, Africans, and indigenous peoples of the

⁸ Hayden White, during part of the crisis of representation in the discipline of history, drew attention to “employment” and metanarratives (White, 2015). White took the previously unthinkable step of treating historical writing the same way as fiction writing, and forced historians to think about how they reshaped the past through their efforts to tell a story.

Americas live “outside of history.” This spirit was naturally annihilating, for indigenous America “has always shown itself physically and psychically powerless, and still shows itself so. For the aborigines, after the landing of the Europeans in America, gradually vanished at the breath of European activity” (quoted in Stam & Shohat, 2012, p. 62).

These were powerful stories, and they were constitutive of a Eurocentric sense of self that extends across many contexts. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam summarize the overall metanarrative plot:

Eurocentric temporal discourse develops an evolutionary narrative within which the West is figured as “ahead” and its others as “behind.” In this metanarrative of progress, a linear (“Plato-to-NATO”) teleology sees progress as an express train moving inexorably north-by-northwest from classical Greece to imperial Rome on to the metropolitan capitals of Europe and the United States. A “presentist” historiography writes history backward so that Europe is seen as always tending toward the progressive and innovative, while the periphery is always in danger of reverting to the backward and static. (Stam & Shohat, 2012, p. 65)

A striking illustration of this narrative can be seen at New York City’s Customs House (built 1902–1907), a building created to regulate the international trade of this major port. Four monumental statues by Daniel Chester French represent the continents of Asia, Africa, Europe and America: some very hungry Asian people languish around a stately but asleep religious monarch who represents “Oriental despotism” and sits atop a platform of skulls (Figure 2). A regal Europe wears armor plates and a dress and reclines against a ship that represents commerce and exploration. Meanwhile, a young Euro-American figure holding a torch (perhaps of the world spirit) and a sheaf of corn sits upon a Mesoamerican throne with Maya hieroglyphs, while an elder Native American in a Plains culture headdress is shunted to the back (Figure 3). Africa is sleeping and half-nude, reclining on a wild lion and an Egyptian sphinx.

The social evolutionary story of human history, as a single upwards development culminating in the West, was built in the disciplines of anthropology and geography. In the 1920s and 1930s, historians led by James Harvey Robinson incorporated this story into the opening chapters of history texts, as a sort of first chapter of human history. Daniel Segal traces how Robinson’s graduate seminars at Columbia University, where he taught the long chronology to future textbook writers, inspired a national curriculum oriented around social evolution and “the rise of rational thought, located in the West.”

This is how a metanarrative, in this case Eurocentric social evolutionary thinking, becomes common sense. Around 1900, there was an empirical revolution in which anthropologists went out to study so-called “primitive cultures” using various mechanisms of in-person fieldwork. In the United States, this was signalled by Franz Boas’ encounter with the Kwakiutl and other Northwest Pacific coastal native peoples. As foragers who live in large settlements with hierarchical community relations, they broke all the rules that were supposed to divide the savages from the barbarians from the civilized. Boas later declared, “As soon as we

admit that the hypothesis of a uniform evolution of culture has to be proved before it can be accepted, the whole structure loses its foundation" (Boas, 1920, pp. 311–312).

Eight decades later, however, social evolutionary narratives persisted. As Segal found in 2000, "contemporary texts of both genres show fundamental continuities with the social evolutionary narrative and plot (Segal, 2000, p. 772). More broadly, "studies of textbooks reveal that these texts conveyed narratives filled with stereotypes and negative depictions of Indigenous Peoples," (Shear et al., 2015). This is most North Americans' common sense about human history now. But it need not be. The disciplines of anthropology and history have moved on, there is a vast array of counter-narratives, of other plots, waiting in the scholarly literature.

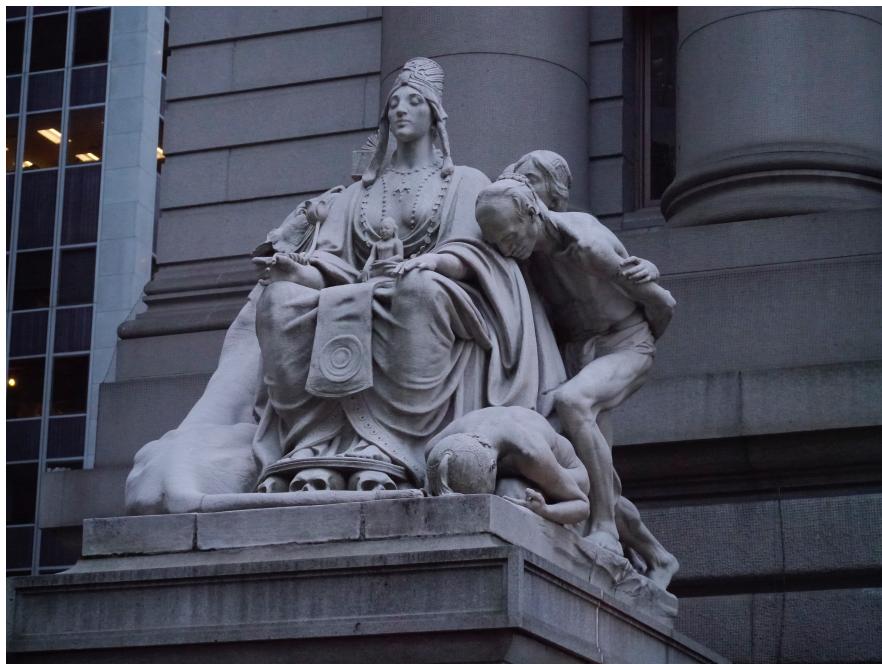


Figure 2. “Asia” sculpture depicts suffering and death as the consequences of the decadent rule of Oriental despotism. Sculpture by Daniel Chester French at the United States Customs House, New York City. (photo by author)



Figure 3. “America” sculpture depicts a European youth seated on a Mesoamerican throne, with a traditional Plains Indian displaced into the past. Sculpture by Daniel Chester French at the United States Customs House, New York City. As part of the decolonization of knowledge institutions, the building has become a site for the National Museum of the American Indian, an entity within the Smithsonian Institution largely consisting of Native American scholars representing their own communities’ history and culture. (photo by author)

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Red Power movement [edit] [edit source]

A *start-class* article from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The **Red Power movement** was a social movement led by [American Indian](#) youth to demand self-determination for Indians in the United States. Organizations that were part of Red Power Movement included [American Indian Movement](#) (AIM) and [National Indian Youth Council](#) (NIYC).^[1] This movement sought the rights for Indians to make policies and programs for themselves while maintaining and controlling their own land and resources.^[1] The Red Power movement took a confrontational and civil disobedience approach to inciting change in United States to American Indian affairs^[2] compared to using negotiations and settlements, which national Indian groups such as [National Congress of American Indians](#) had before.^[1] Red Power centered around mass action, militant action, and unified action.^[3]

The phrase "Red Power", attributed to the author [Vine Deloria, Jr.](#), commonly expressed a growing sense of pan-Indian identity in the late 1960s among [American Indians](#) in the United States.^[3]

Events that were part of the movement include the [Occupation of Alcatraz](#), the [Trail of Broken Treaties](#), the [Occupation of Wounded Knee](#), along with intermittent protests and occupations throughout the era.^[4] The lasting impression of the Red Power movement was the resurrection of American Indian pride, action, and awareness.^[2] Many bills and laws were also enacted in favor of American Indians in response to the Red Power movement, one of the most important being the reversal of tribe recognition termination.^[5]

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2.2 National Indian Youth Council	
2.3 Women of All Red Nations	
2.4 International Indian Treaty Council	

Red Power movement	
Part of Civil rights movements	
	
Flag of the American Indian Movement	
Date	1960s - 1970s
Location	Mainly the United States
Caused by	Oppression of American Indians
Goals	Recognition by US, American Indian awareness
Methods	Occupations, Armed Struggle, Protest
Parties to the civil conflict	
Red Power Groups	 Government of the United States
Armed Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• American Indian Movement
Unarmed Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• United States Congress• Municipal Police
Lakota Freedom Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• National Council on Indian Opportunity
Lead figures	

Figure 4. Top of the Wikipedia page on the "Red Power movement" as written by student Melia Simpkins as part of the author's Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples class.

A Wikipedia Classroom Assignment on History and Narrative

Since 2012, I have incorporated editing Wikipedia into my teaching, mostly as part of a course on the human rights of indigenous peoples. Students have written articles on the Red Power movement (see Figure 4), Bilingual Indigenous Education in Guatemala, Cheyenne peace negotiator Lean Bear, and the Native American policy of the Richard Nixon and Barack Obama administrations.⁹ This kind of writing meshes with the broader project of countering systemic bias by filling gaps in Wikipedia content. There are many such opportunities, and the availability of abundant scholarly material about many topics that receive limited or no coverage on Wikipedia makes such work possible.

Now, I am employing a new type of assignment that addresses language and metanarratives. One of the ways I approach this in the classroom is to read such a critique and have my students apply it to Wikipedia content, not as writers of new content but as critics of what already exists.

James Merrell, a senior historian of colonial North America, was a participant in the rethinking of his discipline in ways that include full consideration of indigenous peoples. In 1989, he wrote a review article arguing that colonial historians cannot do their work without much greater study of Native Americans:

⁹ I'm treating some examples where students expanded existing articles fourfold or more in this list.

Indians were very much a part of the early American scene, even late in the colonial era and in places long since taken over by Europeans. Our failure to grasp this simple yet vital fact of life in early America has crippled our every effort to reconstruct the colonial world on paper. (Merrell, 1989, p. 117)

I have my students read Merrell's 2012 follow-up article ("Second Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians"), which acknowledges that in the intervening decades, colonial historians "have come a long way," but argues that the overall narrative arc and language often remain stuck in the old patterns. "The root of the problem," he argues, "lies in the very words used to tell stories about olden times" (Merrell, 2012, pp. 456, 457). This claim is backed up by fifty-five further pages highlighting deceptive language and narrative tropes, and countering them with facts and scholarship.

This is the assignment I have students carry out using this critique:

Consider these concerns raised in the Merrell article. Identify a place on Wikipedia where they apply.

- "The root of the problem lies in the very words used to tell stories about olden times."
- "Maps accompanying the new work do similar damage by making America look sparsely populated." (466)
- "scholarly obliteration of indigenous farming" (471)
- "indigenous peoples were sovereign nations, it is remarkable how often ordinary usage reinforces a contrary view ... by accepting European (and, later, American) talk of ruling peoples and territories." (479)
- "It is getting well ahead of the story to declare that Tuscaroras were 'living in North Carolina' rather than in Tuscarora territory." (482)
- "Making every Native man a warrior tints Indian-colonial relations red." (486)
- "despite a wealth of work proving otherwise (to say nothing of land claims lawsuits, popular powwows, and crowded casinos), they are removed as surely as if they actually had been eliminated two hundred years ago" (507)

Choose one of Merrell's points about writing history that are relevant to the article you're evaluating. Leave your evaluation on the article's Talk page.

Merrell's article is full of such examples for students to go through and look for these things on Wikipedia. Obviously commenting is just the beginning. With future classes, I plan to go a bit deeper and systematically work to correct these biases. But even this initial process is suggestive of ways that both classes and editors can systematically revise Wikipedia, via a different kind of effort than filling the gaps. This is an effort that re-examines the stories that they're already being told, and brings new data to them, and one that learns from the burgeoning scholarly literature and directly implants more inclusive narratives into the broad sweep of history presented on Wikipedia.

W French and Indian War - Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_and_Indian_War 90% [Search](#)

America in the 1750s [\[edit\]](#) [\[edit source\]](#)

At this time, America east of the Mississippi River was largely claimed by either Great Britain or France. Large areas had no colonial settlements. The French population numbered about 75,000 and was heavily concentrated along the [St. Lawrence River](#) valley, with some also in Acadia (present-day [New Brunswick](#) and parts of [Nova Scotia](#)), including [Île Royale \(Cape Breton Island\)](#). Fewer lived in [New Orleans](#), [Biloxi, Mississippi](#), [Mobile, Alabama](#), and small settlements in the [Illinois Country](#), hugging the east side of the Mississippi River and its tributaries. French fur traders and trappers traveled throughout the St. Lawrence and Mississippi watersheds, did business with local Indian tribes, and often married Indian women.^[14] Traders married daughters of chiefs, creating high-ranking unions.

British settlers outnumbered the French 20 to 1^[15] with a population of about 1.5 million ranged along the eastern coast of the continent from Nova Scotia and the [Colony of Newfoundland](#) in the north to the [Province of Georgia](#) in the south.^[16] Many of the older colonies had land claims that extended arbitrarily far to the west, as the extent of the continent was unknown at the time when their provincial charters were granted. Their population centers were along the coast, yet the settlements were growing into the interior. Nova Scotia had been captured from France in 1713, and it still had a significant French-speaking population. Britain also claimed [Rupert's Land](#) where the [Hudson's Bay Company](#) traded for furs with local Indian tribes.



In between the French and British colonists, large areas were dominated by Indian tribes. To the north, the [Mi'kmaq](#)s and the [Abenaki](#)s were engaged in [Father Le Loutre's War](#) and still held sway in parts of Nova Scotia, Acadia, and the eastern portions of the [Province of Canada](#), as well as much of Maine.^[17] The [Iroquois Confederation](#) dominated much of upstate New York and the [Ohio Country](#), although Ohio also included [Algonquian](#)-speaking populations of [Delaware](#) and [Shawnee](#), as well as [Iroquoian](#)-speaking [Mingos](#). These tribes were formally under Iroquois rule and were limited by them in their authority to make agreements.^[18]

The Southeast interior was dominated by Siouan-speaking [Catawbas](#), [Muskogee](#)-speaking [Creeks](#) and [Choctaw](#), and the Iroquoian-speaking [Cherokee](#) tribes.^[19] When war broke out, the French colonists used their trading connections to recruit fighters from tribes in western portions of the [Great Lakes region](#), which was not directly subject to the conflict between the French and British; these included the [Hurons](#),



Figure 5. Segment of the Wikipedia page on the “French and Indian War,” featuring a map that treats British, French, and Spanish claims to sovereignty as real and indicates no areas of Native American sovereignty.



Figure 6. Detail of the 1755 “Map of the British and French Dominions in North America” by John Mitchell, centered on Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Creek territories, in present-day Tennessee (labeled as North Carolina), northern Mississippi and northern Alabama (labeled as South Carolina).



Figure 7. Jacques Nicholas Bellin's 1755 map, "Partie Occidentale de la Nouvelle France ou du Canada," depicting the indigenous territories of the Great Lakes region at the time of the French and Indian War.

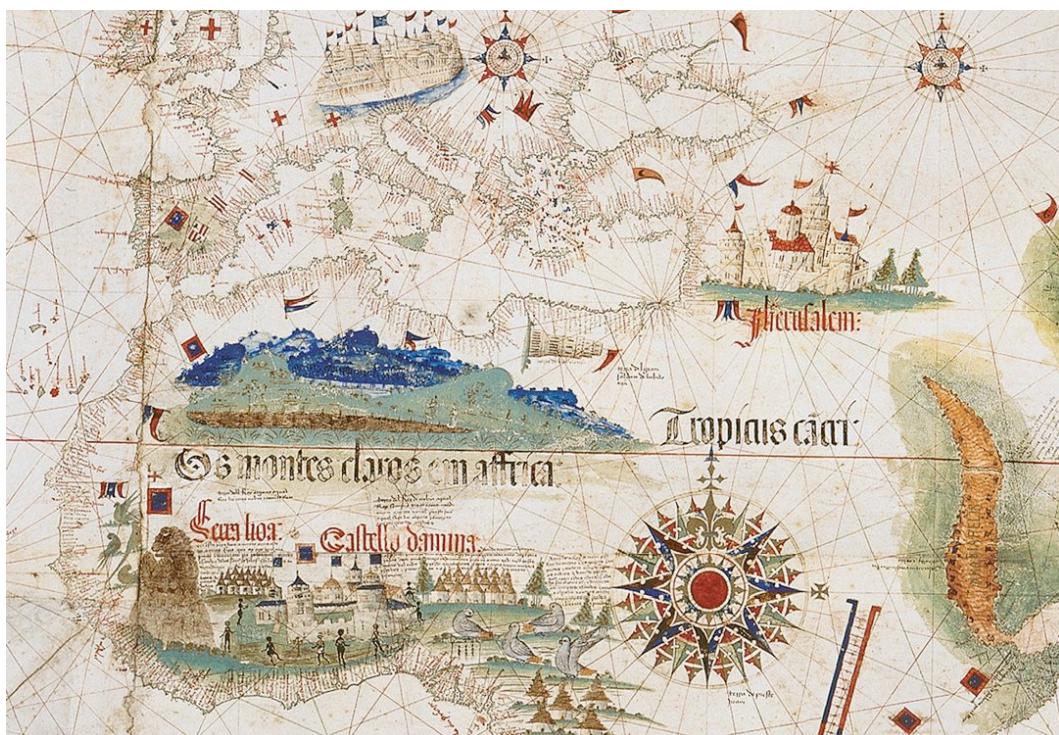


Figure 8. Detail of the 1502 Cantino Planisphere, an anonymous map labelled "Carta de navigar per le Isole nouam trovate in le parte de India: dono Alberto Cantino al S. Duca Hercole."

Putting indigenous peoples back on the map

A related project would put indigenous peoples literally back on the map within Wikipedia. Again, this is an area where common sense is distorted by grade-school and high-school textbooks, but where there is ample scholarship. Consider the fairly typical map of “1750 possessions of Britain, France, and Spain” that appears on the Wikipedia page on the “French and Indian War” (Figure 5). On a map like this, portions of North America without European claims are a magical gray empty space. It is like *terra nullius*—the legal fiction that the Americas and Australia were uninhabited and the property of no one—made tangible. On the other hand, Figure 6 shows the Mitchell map, a prominent map of the same space produced around 1755. Admittedly this map too indulges in some fictions, such as the definite boundary lines that run due west off the page. Only magical thinking could turn North Carolina (for instance) into an endless strip that goes all the Pacific. But if one zooms in on what that strip lays over (Figure 6), you see is that the North and South Carolina claims coincide with a detailed description of the territories, rivers, and towns belonging to the “Cherakeses [sic]”, “Chickasaws,” and “Creek Indians.” There was no grey empty space in the real world of real European colonizers. They knew who was there and they had to know who was there in order to even to carry forward the settler colonial project, in order to trade, build alliances, claim territories, and yes, invade and occupy lands. The same thing can be seen in Bellin’s map of the Great Lakes in 1756 (Figure 7). On the map, the upper Midwest is just labelled as “land of the Eries” and “land of the Miamis” and “land of the Hurons.” This is how the French understood it and it’s far too easy for us in retrospect to colour in light blue all of that as New France. The New French themselves would be confused by our maps.

On Wikipedia, since everything before 1923 is public domain, we have the opportunity to use these maps directly as illustrations for phases of history. Take, for example, the Cantino Planisphere, a 1502 Portuguese-produced map (Figure 8). Its detail on the west coast of Africa in 1500 far exceeds the current historical maps on Wikipedia. It can serve as both a Wikipedia illustration, and as an inspiration for the kind of depictions we ought to create.

Lastly, I want to share this map of towns in the American southeast. It appears in a recently published scholarly book, *From Chicaza to Chickasaw* (Ethridge, 2010), which traces the fracturing and recombination of indigenous communities under pressure from European slave raiding and slave trading. During the 1600s, as many Native Americans were enslaved in American South as African-Americans. Only after 1700 did this trade collapse, leading to the single-race system of chattel slavery in the United States. I show Ethridge’s 1650 map (Figure 9) to my first-year undergraduate students every year, many of whom grew up in the southeast. None of them have ever seen any of these towns on a map, except for the three highlighted here: the European settlements of Jamestown, Richmond, and St. Augustine. And the latter are usually depicted as part of broad areas called Spanish Florida and Virginia. The very idea that Native Americans had permanent settlements and that they belong on the same map is actually a revolutionary visual concept.

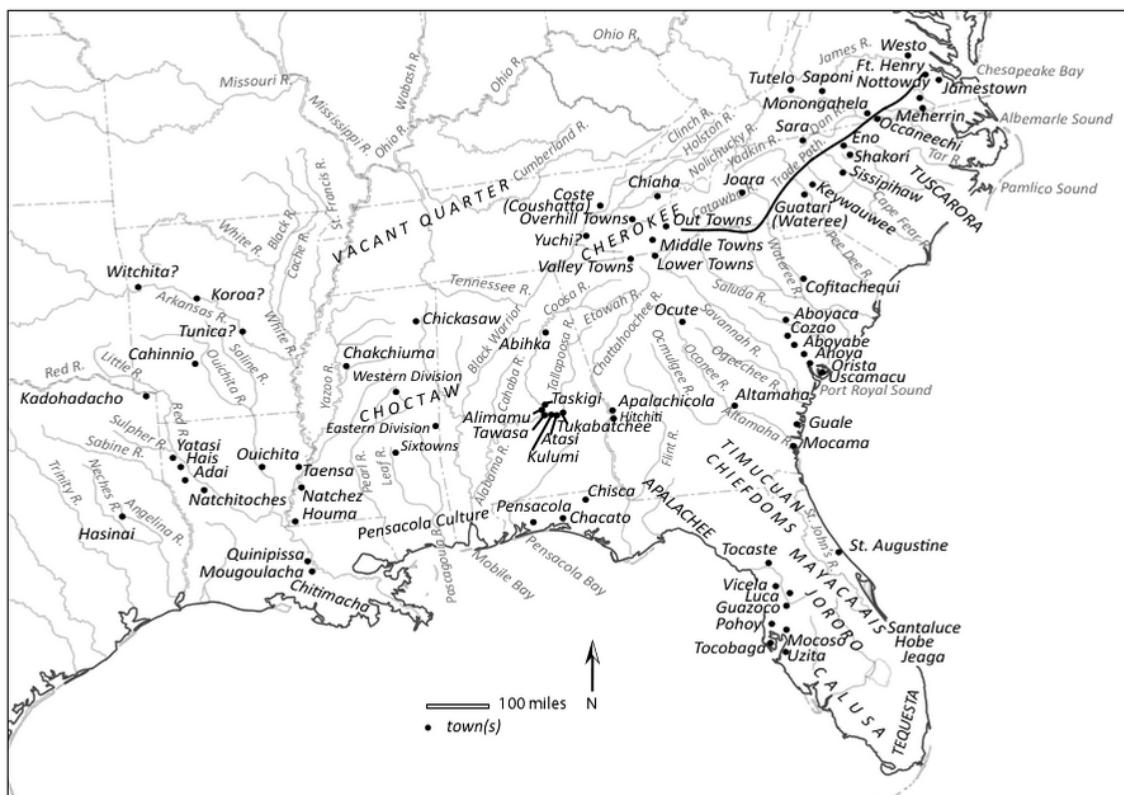


Figure 9. Map of towns in the American Southeast circa 1650, appearing in Robbie Ethridge's *From Chicaza to Chickasaw* (2010). Only three towns, the English settlements at Jamestown and Ft. Henry and Spanish settlement at St. Augustine, appear in most history textbook maps.

Conclusion: Mapping the work of countering systemic bias

Countering the systemic bias that leads to the under-representation of marginalized peoples is an opportunity and responsibility shared by significant numbers of Wikipedians and scholars, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. More qualitative and far-reaching strategies can change the view of the world provided through Wikipedia in ways that bring it closer to the goal of conveying “the sum of all human knowledge.” Herein I have highlighted two new strategies to add to the countering systemic bias toolkit: (1) the application of scholarly understandings of systemic bias to systematically review, and eventually improve, Wikipedia articles; and (2) the introduction of new maps that literally include communities that have been written out of history. These strategies can be pursued either through classroom teaching or coordinated editing campaigns.

To conclude I want to present a final kind of map that stands alongside these maps for time (metanarratives and scholarly complexity) and for space (geography that sees rather than erases indigenous peoples). This is a map for measuring our progress in overcoming systemic bias. And once again, I find inspiration in the work of an area of academic life that is part of this broader intellectual shift: gender studies.

Much of the effort within the Wikipedia community on bias up to the present has focused on mobilizing greater numbers of editors from under-represented groups. Initiatives such as AfroCROWD, Women in Red, and the Art + Feminism edit-a-thons focus on “content gaps,” such as gender, racial, and national disparities in the

number of biographies on Wikipedia. Programs such as the university-level classroom program coordinated by Wiki Education seek to attract demographically diverse contributors and “target content areas that are underdeveloped in order to reduce systemic bias” (Wiki Education, 2018).

Filling content gaps may be the most readily defined and quantifiable way of addressing systemic bias, but it shouldn’t form our only horizon for this work. Four decades ago, in the 1980s, feminist academics wrestled with this very question. Looking back with both pride and critique on the changes to the curriculum that had emerged in the previous decade and a half, they often used the phrase “add women and stir” to describe the sense of incompleteness of their work so far (Fauss, 1981; Howe, 1982; Dinnerstein et al., 1982). In her 1985 article, “Feminist Phase Theory,” Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault proposed that the “search for missing women according to a male norm of greatness, excellence, or humanness”—what she called “compensatory scholarship”—was only the first of four phases that go beyond the “male scholarship” that left out women altogether (Tetreault, 1985, Table 1). Tetreault’s expansive framework includes a phase of “bifocal scholarship” that puts direct attention on the spheres of life in which women and men live, as well as on the power relations between them; and a phase of “feminist scholarship” that “pursues new questions, new categories, and new notions of significance which illuminate women’s traditions, history, culture, values, visions, and perspectives,” acknowledges intersectionality¹⁰ of statuses, and deploys new methodologies to record interior experience. Finally, a “multifocal or relational scholarship” can incorporate the experiences and dynamics of the earlier phases into “a holistic view of human experience.”¹¹

Put in the concrete terms of Wikipedia, compensatory scholarship involves writing biographies of exemplary individuals from indigenous and colonized societies and documenting their place in the history of colonial states. Bifocal scholarship puts indigenous and colonized societies on par, describing Hopi Mythology, *Mink'a* (Quechua collective work systems), and both extant and traditional indigenous territories with the same depth as their non-indigenous counterparts. Decolonial scholarship draws on the proliferation of documentary films, news programming, and printed sources, including scholarly work, memoirs, and those produced within cultural revitalization campaigns, to provide deep and broad coverage of indigenous life, and its integration and clashes with colonial and nation-state cultures and histories. Finally, the stories of national and world history, of economics, and of non-indigenous historic figures must come to incorporate their interconnection with indigenous land and its dispossession, political alliances in the course of colonial expansion, and participation in systems of power structured around settler colonialism and slavery. Again, academic and journalistic scholarship has long since advanced into these arenas, producing synthetic accounts of (and here I only scratch the surface) the interconnection of the US-British wars (1754-1814) and indigenous political alliances (Hall, 2003), state-funded mass murder during the

¹⁰ Tetreault doesn’t use this term, introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), but rather refers to a “a pluralistic conception of women ... which acknowledges diversity and recognizes that other variables besides gender shape women’s lives; for example, race, ethnicity, and social class” (Tetreault, 1985, Table 1).

¹¹ For a parallel series of stages, thought through around “internationalizing the women’s studies curriculum,” see Mohanty (2003).

founding of the state of California (Lindsay, 2012; Madley, 2016), and United States universities founded on the wealth of expropriated indigenous land (*Land Grab Universities*, 2020).

A collective effort straddles decolonial, feminist, and antiracist work within the academy and within Wikipedia, one that—in the phrasing of Jina Valentine and Eliza Myrie of Black Lunch Table—“intends to rewrite the record and make right the systemic biases that have led to historical omissions” (Valentine & Myrie, 2019). Drawing on a broad range of scholarship, we can identify a variety of ways that marginalized people can be written back in, ways that differ fundamentally from the “Add marginalized people and stir” model. I think it is time for more conversations about literal and figurative maps to document knowledge about marginalized people on Wikipedia. Like any well-crafted map, these initiatives will not just change whether we can see those who were once left out, but how we see the world as a whole.

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