

Women scientists, Wikipedia under microscope in US

October 16 2013, by Michelle R. Smith



In this Tuesday, Oct. 15, 2013 photo, Maia Weinstock, of Cambridge, Mass., left, a Brown University graduate, works with Anne Fausto-Sterling, of Cranston, R.I., center, a professor of biology and gender studies, during a Wikipedia "edit-a-thon," on the Brown campus, in Providence, R.I. They held the event, which brought together dozens of people, to train them on how to add and edit pages to Wikipedia, to coincide with Ada Lovelace Day, an annual observance started in Great Britain in 2009 to highlight women in technology and named for the English mathematician who died in 1852. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Look up a female scientist or technologist on Wikipedia, and you might not find what you're looking for. Many don't have detailed pages or any page at all on the free online encyclopedia created by contributors, the vast majority of them men.

It's a symptom of a larger problem for women in so-called STEM fields—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—where men far outnumber women. Even women who have done pioneering work in these fields don't always get recognition. Since 2009, no woman has won a Nobel Prize in science.

A Brown University biology professor and an alumna hope to help chip away at the problem with a Wikipedia "edit-a-thon," one of many that's been held in recent years to help increase the representation of women on Wikipedia.

They gathered dozens of students and some faculty members this week at Brown to train them on how to add and edit pages. They also provided lists of suggestions for women to add, entries to clean up or those who needed more detail, along with links to source material.

Among those listed was Ingeborg Hochmair, who does not have a page even though last month she won the prestigious Lasker Award for medical research for her work developing the modern cochlear implant. By contrast, her husband, Erwin Hochmair, an accomplished engineer who helped develop the device but did not win a Lasker prize, has his own page.

Another is Anny Cazenave, who last year won the William Bowie Medal for outstanding contributions to fundamental geophysics. She's on Wikipedia in French, but not English.



In this Tuesday, Oct. 15, 2013 photo, Maia Weinstock, of Cambridge, Mass., a Brown University graduate, works on her computer during a Wikipedia "edit-a-thon," on the Brown campus, in Providence, R.I. They held the event, which brought together dozens of people to train them on how to add and edit pages to Wikipedia, to coincide with Ada Lovelace Day, an annual observance started in Great Britain in 2009 to highlight women in technology and named for the English mathematician who died in 1852. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Maia Weinstock, a Brown graduate, organized the Tuesday event with Anne Fausto-Sterling, a professor of biology and gender studies. They held the training to coincide with Ada Lovelace Day, an annual observance started in Great Britain in 2009 to highlight women in technology and named for the English mathematician who died in 1852.

Lovelace is often described as the world's first computer programmer.

Weinstock, who has run other edit-a-thons for different fields, said she's targeting Wikipedia because it's so influential and is one of the most popular encyclopedias in the world. It's the first place many people go to find out about a subject.

"You're helping change what everybody else gets to see on a particular topic," she told trainees.

She said she also hopes to increase the number of women who contribute to Wikipedia. Fewer than 20 percent of Wikipedia editors are women.

Sara Hartse and Jacqueline Gu, both Brown freshmen and computer science students, said they first became aware of gender inequity on Wikipedia during an uproar in the spring when someone began systematically moving female novelists including Harper Lee and Ann Rice off the "American Novelists" page and onto the "American Women Novelists" subcategory.

They've both seen big gender imbalances in science and technology classes and activities and heard their female computer science professor bemoan the fact that talented women often leave the field. Neither had edited a Wikipedia page before this week, but spent the evening cleaning up and adding details to pages for botanist Katherine Esau and oceanographer Sylvia Earle.

"I like this because it's about empowering women to contribute to this," Hartse said. "It's a good feedback loop."

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