

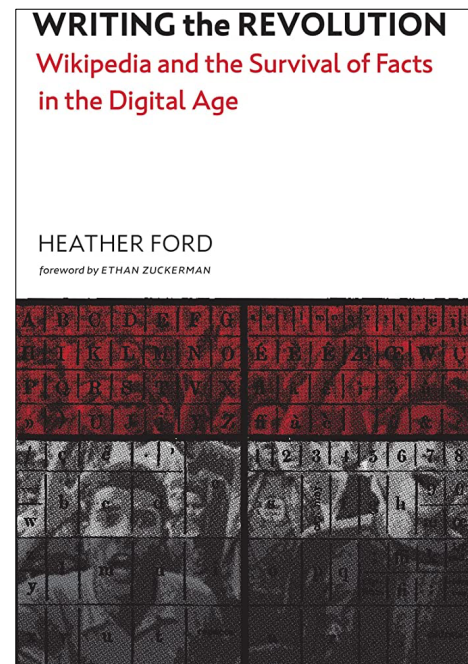
Heather Ford, **Writing the Revolution: Wikipedia and the Survival of Facts in the Digital Age**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022, 181 pp., \$25.00 (paperback), \$18.99 (Kindle).

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When Wikipedia was launched in 2001, it introduced a cutting-edge, open-source model of knowledge production, transforming the ways in which both the Internet and encyclopedias are conceived. “The free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” now available in over 300 languages and comprised of an all-volunteer workforce, boasts of the dehierarchized way in which its entries are written. Such an approach would seem to value an epistemology more conducive to democracy than what was offered by predigital encyclopedias, seen as by many as exclusive, Western-centric, and handmaidens of colonialism. However, some academics have questioned Wikipedia’s utopic self-presentation, critiquing its power dynamics (Bjork-James, 2021; Torres, 2016).

In her new book, **Writing the Revolution: Wikipedia and the Survival of Facts in the Digital Age**, Heather Ford zeroes in on the ongoing evolution of the encyclopedia’s entry on the 2011 Egyptian revolution to put forward the compelling argument that Wikipedia “co-constructs” the world. Insofar as we are to think of Wikipedia as both encyclopedia and vital infrastructure that many people depend on for their everyday lives, Ford considers the decade-long process of the editing of that article as a case study of how this encyclopedia platform mediates the chaos of historical events as they unfold. Ford’s volume, the first book-length study of a Wikipedia entry, is an important work in digital anthropology, combining secondary and primary resources, the latter consisting principally of her interviews with the editors, or “Wikipedians,” and writers.

This volume will be of interest to readers in social media studies, communication, information studies, anthropology, history, and journalism. Ford’s text is divided into seven main chapters. In chapter 1, “Wikipedia Matters,” she expands on the book’s central thesis that Wikipedia co-constructs the world it represents inasmuch as unlike previous encyclopedias that were solely interested in the past, Wikipedia also deals with current “facts.” The latter are understood here as phenomena about which there is consensus and are preceded by catalytic and volatile “events,” defined here as occurrences for which there is no unanimity. With a painstaking analysis of the Egyptian revolution article, originally begun by the blogger “The Egyptian Liberal” and redacted countless times by various Wikipedians, Ford elegantly expounds on the disputed space and negotiations through which events become facts on Wikipedia, a process increasingly shaped by datafied capital and the algorithmic apparatus. For example, as Ford observes, the encyclopedia’s infoboxes—the term used for the panels displaying keywords and summaries that appear above every Wikipedia article—are a ready source of openly licensed, datafied facts, organized according to a common



semantic language that can be easily transformed by the machines that operate and search and discovery on digital platforms" (p. 4). Wikipedia, then, becomes intertwined with Google's algorithms. Likewise, a great deal of Ford's analysis has to do with complications that arise when datafied facts travel from one database to another, a process largely governed more by algorithms than human judiciousness.

The author begins the second chapter, entitled "Genesis," by situating the Egyptian revolution entry in the context of Wikipedia's history of covering "events," particularly the Arab Spring in 2011, which at the time was considered a series of social media revolutions. Although hyperbolic, that framing points to how mediated these tumultuous events were before they became facts. The Egyptian Liberal and other collaborators writing about the Arab Spring, she observes, "have significant agency in determining what is covered on the encyclopedia," as they "co-create historical events" (p. 40). However, these writer-activists' abilities to freely express themselves is constrained since, as Ford argues throughout the book, they are engaged in ongoing struggles over the classification of data in multiple battle zones, and do not always get to say what they want.

Ford explains in chapter 3, "Eruption," the ins and outs of writing and editing Wikipedia articles and explores the ontology of Wikipedians' journalistic and encyclopedic office. Inasmuch as facts are born digital in code and data, the editors' role is essentially to stabilize the unstable. What is extraordinary about the Egypt revolution article is that The Egyptian Liberal had started writing it on January 24, 2011, a day before the ten-day series of protests broke out, which culminated in the overthrow of Mubarak,. Ultimately, then, Wikipedians' job is "setting up a space to document the future" (p. 61).

The fourth chapter, titled "Escalation," consists of Ford's analysis of the conflictual method of how Wikipedia arbitrates the legitimacy of sources cited in its articles. The act of Wikipedians vetting their sources, a process that is collectively debated on "talk pages," is seen to be another way in which these writer-editors are active participants in the events they are describing. While Wikipedia's policy favors peer-reviewed scholarly sources, their practice in covering events is different. Ford reveals that Wikipedians tend to prefer English-language, journalistic sources rather than social media and traditional broadcasting, where so much of the Arab Spring upheaval in Egypt took place.

Ford considers the struggle over symbols and discourse in the writers and Wikipedians' attempts to stabilize events in the fifth chapter, "Surge." She analyzes the editors' initial disagreements over whether what took place in Egypt in early 2011 should be characterized as an "uprising," "protests," or "revolution." Drawing on Durkheim's theory of collective effervescence (Durkheim & Swain, 2008), Ford analogizes the turbulent events of Tahir Square with the collective writing of the Wikipedia article. In both spaces, crowds ultimately stabilized the narrative. This is one of the strongest chapters.

In the sixth chapter, "Translation," the author discusses the 2012 rise of Wikidata, Wikipedia's sister site, and how the newer database has changed the character of the Egyptian revolution article. Via bots and algorithms, Wikidata is tasked with helping the encyclopedia achieve greater interwiki consistency across its various online initiatives and the non-English versions of Wikipedia. This involves the migration of facts from the environment of Wikipedia's English-language site to foreign databases since "most people will encounter Wikipedia's facts about the Egyptian revolution via search engines and digital assistants rather than directly on Wikipedia" (p. 118). Unsurprisingly, context and nuance are lost in the translation.

Ford draws on Dayan and Katz's (1992) seminal study of "media events" in chapter 7, entitled "Toward People's Histories." In the 1990s, historic events were considered meaningless until they were broadcast on television, a process that also unified publics. By contrast, she observes, events in the 2020s consist of a cacophony of fragmented voices that do not agree on what happened. This becomes "a myriad of actors across digital platforms [that] are documenting historic events as they happen" (p. 134). In the current Internet ecosystem, events that become history are datafied shortly after they occur, where they undergo a contentious process in which they might or might not be stabilized. From a historiographical perspective, this dynamic presents challenges to writing history "from below."

One limitation of this fantastic multisited online ethnography is that it does not have a bibliography. Ford, who is very much involved in the world she writes about, uses many important sources. Compiling them together would have added some welcome user-friendliness to the book.

To conclude, one of the principal points to glean from *Writing the Revolution* is that Wikipedia is a contested space. On the one hand, as the case of the Egyptian revolution article indicates, this incident transformed the digital encyclopedia by setting a precedent in which catalysts of history could now recount historical events as they unfold from their own vantage points. On the other hand, contrary to how it presents itself, Wikipedia, the only Internet giant run by a nonprofit organization, is not a neutral database of facts. Rather, its curation of datafied facts is governed by the same algorithmic apparatus, subject to forms of biases and influence, that control Big Tech. Such power wrangling stymies critical voices, such as that of The Egyptian Liberal. Thus, for example, despite the achievement of pressuring the Wikipedians to change the framing of their 2011 entry from "protests" and "uprising" to "revolution," a decade after the article first appeared, many of those who had participated in the revolutionary upheaval remain discontented with parts of the article. This disillusionment became even more acute in the context of Egypt devolving back to authoritarianism in the post-Arab Spring era. Ultimately, Ford calls for data literacy, as in the final analysis, it is not bots or algorithms who make facts, but nondatafied people.

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