

Black Studies and Wikipedia: Our next frontier is in cyberspace

Abdul Alkalimat

There are opportunities that sometimes are hidden in plain view. We all want Black Studies to become an academic discipline of global relevance, yet we are not engaged in working with the intervention in cyberspace that gives us the greatest opportunity to be just that. Wikipedia is where the world goes first for information – check any search engine and wiki will be one of the top three choices. It is the argument in this paper that this is the greatest moment for Black people to practice self-definition, self-determination in consciousness and to have the agency for making this global. We now have the way; we only have to generate the will. This paper is a call for NCBS to lead Black Studies programs and scholar/activists to take the challenge to transform all relevant entries in Wikipedia with the perspective and research that we have and continue to produce in Black Studies.

What is Wikipedia?

The short answer is that it is a new online encyclopedia outsourced to all of us. We write it and update it on a daily basis; hence it is a new democratic format for creating knowledge. It is the new logic of from all of us to all of us, and that's why the corporations and the elites are dissing it so much. If the people can do things on their own, then we can begin to reorganize the rest of society around this logic of bottom up to replace what we have now which is top down.

Is this legitimate knowledge?

There is a great deal of discussion about this topic based on personal experience. We need raise the level of our discussion to that of research about the topic:

http://www2.imm.dtu.dk/pubdb/views/publication_details.php?id=6012 because the short answer is yes, there is a great deal of quality to the information in Wikipedia, though it is not without problems. The wonderful aspect of Wikipedia is that we can change errors immediately, something we can't do with the printed or other online sources.

There is also growing support for Wikipedia, and a call for more participation by academics. Erik Wright is leading sociologists in that direction: http://www.asanet.org/about/wiki_Initiative.cfm. Also something similar is being proposed for the American Historical Association: "James Grossman, president of the American Historical Association, says he also uses Wikipedia on occasion, if never as a final source. On hearing of ASA's initiative and reading Wright's rationale, Grossman told *Inside Higher Ed* that he intends to discuss with his board whether the historical association ought to pursue a similar strategy." (<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/11/18/sociology-association-encourages-members-help-improve-wikipedia>)

Our tasks:

The time has come for Black Studies faculty and student to accept the challenge to become active producers of knowledge for the world via Wikipedia. This is the greatest moment we have ever had for

self-definition and self-determination in the production of knowledge by Black people about Black people, for Black people and everybody else. There are no gate keepers except the debate that goes on in the Wikipedia format. We (as a collective body of scholars) have not yet tried, hence no one can speak with the weight of our collective experience. We all quote Fanon about each generation discovering its mission. In the information age if we don't do this we will betray this moment's potential in the eyes of those yet to be born. They will look for us in cyber-space and only find the voice of others speaking about us. We have between 35 and 40 thousand students in Black Studies classes every term. With this labor pool we can create a massive knowledge base if we choose to act collectively.

What needs to be done about existing entries in Wikipedia?

Our first task is to start reading the entries that are already in Wikipedia and begin to update them. This means adding new info, correcting errors, and providing additional detail to what's already there and accurate. This will reveal to us where the most important 21st century debate about Black people can be found – it is in cyberspace in places like Wikipedia. It won't be easy as it will produce a debate and challenge Black Studies to be better in research and in producing text.

What new entries are needed?

Our baseline of information in Black Studies is what we have written and what we teach. If we start there we will have people, organizations, dates, events, places, art and books, and much more that needs to all have some kind of entry in Wikipedia. We will find many silences and for that we need to create new material. Does every slave revolt have an entry? Does every artist and intellectual of note in the Harlem Renaissance, the 1960's, and every major ideological trend have a bio entry? Does every neighborhood from South Central LA to The Ink Well near Martha's Vineyard have an entry? Etc.

What is our long term editorial role?

This is a permanent task for Black Studies. As long as there is a public way for the people in this country to create knowledge about themselves then Black Studies must stand tall and represent the Black community. We are an intellectual arm of our people and must take care of business.

How can we make this recognized as scholarship?

First people need to stake out a topic for their Wikipedia scholarship. Then they need to have a record of the new entries they make and the number of edits they make. This data should be reported at the end of each year to document their wiki scholarship. After some time doing this it will be possible to get other scholars in the field to write letters that attest to the value of the scholarship. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen if we take it up as a collective way to change campus culture. If Black Studies takes the lead on this, and we value each other, then the entire campus will follow us.

How can we integrate this into our teaching?

My experience is that students love the assignment to create an entry and then to defend it and edit when others enter in. Moreover it is a way of helping them understand that their role is to bring their

knowledge back to the people and to share it with their community. It is a concrete case of our national mission: **“Academic excellence and social responsibility.”**

We have to affirm cultural values for Black people as we seek to affirm our freedom struggle in the 21st century:

1. **Cyberdemocracy:** everybody across the digital divide
2. **Collective intelligence:** everybody uploading information
3. **Information freedom:** all information accessible to all

Now is the time to make a move. Some of us have a more difficult time than others in writing the requisite articles and books. Let's create a culture where one can start with an entry in Wikipedia. It is the way people get information on the web these days. It's the way for Black Studies to be the major source of knowledge about Black people. We have the way. All we need is the will.

12/10/2011