

10-Week Seminar Outline

Words as Weapons: Wikipedia, Cultural Heritage, and the Politics of Digital Erasure

Week 1 – Wikipedia is not Neutral: Open Knowledge and Power

The opening session introduces Wikipedia as one of the most influential knowledge infrastructures of the twenty-first century. Although Wikipedia is often described as open, collaborative, and neutral, its rules and editorial practices are shaped by social, political, linguistic, and institutional inequalities. We will examine how principles such as neutrality, verifiability, and reliable sourcing can function both as safeguards against misinformation and as mechanisms that reproduce existing power structures. The session will frame Wikipedia as a public arena in which authority is constantly negotiated: who is allowed to define a cultural object, a historical event, a community, or a place? Whose sources count as reliable? Whose memory is visible, and whose is treated as marginal or insufficiently documented? Participants will be invited to think critically about why Wikipedia has become such an important site for struggles over public memory and cultural legitimacy.

Key questions:

- What does “neutrality” mean on a platform shaped by unequal access to archives, institutions, languages, and publishing systems?
- How can Wikipedia’s own rules protect knowledge while also enabling exclusion?
- Why do conflicts over heritage and identity often appear as conflicts over wording?

Required Readings

- Joseph Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia* (MIT Press, 2010), Chapter 1 ‘Nazis and Norms,’ pp. 1–15. [Full chapter]
- Wikipedia, ‘Neutral Point of View’ policy page (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view). [online]
- Wikipedia, ‘Verifiability’ policy page (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability). [online]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Heather Ford, *Writing the Revolution: Wikipedia and the Survival of Facts in the Digital Age* (MIT Press, 2022), Chapter 1, pp. 1–22.
- Wikipedia, ‘Five Pillars’ policy page (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars).
- Andrew Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution* (Hyperion, 2009), Chapter 4, ‘The Neutral Point of View,’ pp. 77–98.

Week 2 – Cultural Heritage as a Battlefield of Memory

This session examines cultural heritage as a field of political struggle rather than a neutral inheritance from the past. Monuments, inscriptions, religious sites, museums, cemeteries, archives, and place names often serve as evidence in competing claims over territory, identity, and historical legitimacy.

We will discuss how heritage can be used to affirm belonging, but also how it can be appropriated, renamed, destroyed, or detached from the communities that created or preserved it. The session introduces cultural heritage as both material and discursive: heritage exists in buildings, objects, and landscapes, but also in names, descriptions, categories, captions, metadata, and search results.

The session introduces key concepts from heritage studies and memory studies, preparing participants to understand why digital representations of heritage can become so contested. When an article changes the name of a monument, removes a community attribution, alters chronology, or replaces a culturally specific term with a broader label, the change may appear minor – but its cumulative effect can reshape public memory.

Key questions:

- How does cultural heritage become evidence in political and historical disputes?
- What is the relationship between material heritage and digital representation?
- How can a change in terminology affect public understanding of ownership, origin, or belonging?

Required Readings

- Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Routledge, 2006), Introduction, pp. 1–11.
- UNESCO, *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* (The Hague, 1954), Preamble and Chapters I–III (Articles 1–14): General Provisions, Special Protection, Transport.
- UNESCO, *Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage* (2003), full text. [open access, 4 pp.]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), Chapter 1, pp. 1–20.
- David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), Chapter 1, pp. 1–25.
- Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (Routledge, 2013), Introduction, pp. 1–18.
- International Criminal Court, *Prosecutor v. Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi* (ICC-01/12-01/15), Judgment and Sentence, 27 September 2016 – Case Information Sheet and Judgment paras. 13–22, 79–82. The first international conviction for the destruction of cultural heritage as a war crime. [open access]

Week 3 – How Digital Erasure Happens: Edits, Deletions, Renaming

This week focuses on the concrete mechanisms by which digital erasure and distortion occur on Wikipedia. Rather than treating manipulation only as false information, we will examine more subtle practices: changing article titles, removing sources, reframing historical narratives, challenging notability, initiating deletion discussions, and using talk pages to normalize particular interpretations.

Participants will learn how to read edit histories and discussion pages as evidence of conflict over knowledge. The session shows that erasure is often procedural and cumulative: it may happen through many small edits that gradually transform how a person, place, community, or monument is understood.

Special attention will be given to the difference between factual falsification and discursive manipulation. A Wikipedia article may contain technically accurate statements while still producing a distorted picture through selective emphasis, omission, euphemism, or terminological substitution.

Key questions:

- How can digital erasure happen without obvious falsehood?
- What can edit histories reveal that the final article text conceals?
- How do deletion debates, source challenges, and naming disputes become tools of cultural power?

Required Readings

- Taha Yasseri, Robert Sumi, András Rung, András Kornai, and János Kertész, 'Edit Wars in Wikipedia' (arXiv, 2012). [Full article, 4 pp.]
- Taha Yasseri, Robert Sumi, András Rung, András Kornai, and János Kertész, 'Dynamics of Conflicts in Wikipedia,' PLOS ONE 7:6 (2012). [Full article, 12 pp.]
- Wikimedia Foundation, Croatian Wikipedia Disinformation Assessment (Meta-Wiki, 2021), Executive Summary. A documented case of 'project capture', in which a small group of administrators held a language version for roughly a decade. [open access, c. 4 pp.]
- Wikipedia, 'Deletion policy' and 'Article titles' policy pages. [online]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Joseph Reagle and Lauren Rhue, 'Gender Bias in Wikipedia and Britannica,' International Journal of Communication 5 (2011), pp. 1138–1158.

Week 4 – Reading Wikipedia Linguistically: Corpus Methods and Terminological Analysis for Non-Specialists

This session introduces the methodological core of the seminar: how language analysis can help reveal patterns of cultural manipulation. Designed for participants without technical

training, the session explains the basic principles of corpus linguistics, terminology studies, and discourse analysis in accessible terms.

We will examine how repeated word choices, collocations, naming conventions, category labels, and terminological substitutions shape the representation of cultural heritage. Participants will learn how scholars identify patterns such as semantic softening, lexical replacement, evaluative framing, and the disappearance of culturally specific vocabulary.

The session will also demonstrate how simple corpus-based questions can be applied to Wikipedia materials: Which terms appear repeatedly? Which terms disappear over time? What words cluster around a contested place, community, or monument? How does the terminology of one language version differ from another?

Key questions:

- How can linguistic methods make invisible patterns of manipulation visible?
- What is the difference between a single biased phrase and a systematic pattern of lexical change?
- How can corpus linguistics and terminology studies serve public accountability?

Required Readings

- Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (Bloomsbury, 2006/2023), Chapter 1 'Introduction,' pp. 1–7.
- Maria Teresa Cabré, *Terminology: Theory, Methods and Applications* (John Benjamins, 1999), Chapter 1 'An Overview of Terminology.' [Full chapter]
- Wikipedia, 'Manual of Style/Words to watch' (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Manual_of_Style/Words_to_watch). The platform's own account of loaded language – puffery, euphemism, weasel words, and expressions of doubt. [online, c. 4 pp.]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Tony McEnery and Andrew Hardie, *Corpus Linguistics: Method, Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chapter 1 'What Is Corpus Linguistics?'
- Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 2nd ed. (Longman, 2001), Chapter 2, pp. 18–37.

Tools introduced this week (no installation or programming required): Wikipedia page history, 'Revision history statistics', and WikiBlame (to find when a phrase entered or left an article); XTools – article authorship and edit-count reports; Voyant Tools (browser-based) for word frequency and collocation.

Week 5 – Cultural Heritage in Conflict-Affected Regions: Naming, Attribution, and Ownership

This session examines how cultural heritage is represented in contexts of war, occupation, displacement, territorial dispute, and contested sovereignty. We will compare examples from Ukraine and the South Caucasus with additional comparative references where useful.

The focus will be on patterns rather than partisan argument: how digital descriptions of heritage sites change when communities, territories, languages, or historical narratives are under pressure.

We will analyze how monuments, religious buildings, cemeteries, inscriptions, museums, archaeological sites, and architectural ensembles are digitally reframed through naming, attribution, chronology, categorization, and selective citation. The aim is to identify recurring patterns: heritage sites being detached from minority communities, rewritten as belonging to dominant national narratives, presented through softened language, or described in ways that obscure destruction, displacement, or contested ownership.

Participants will also consider the ethical responsibilities of scholars working with conflict-related digital evidence: how to document manipulation without exposing vulnerable communities or simplifying complex histories.

Key questions:

- How do naming and attribution shape perceptions of heritage ownership?
- What happens when cultural heritage is digitally detached from the communities that created or preserved it?
- How can comparative analysis help us see recurring patterns across different regions?

Required Readings

- Mykola Makhortykh, Maryna Sydorova, Aleksandra Urman, and Roberto Ulloa, 'High-Risk Memories? Comparative Audit of the Representation of Second World War Atrocities in Ukraine by Generative AI Applications' (2024). [Full article, 16 pp.]
- Caucasus Heritage Watch (Cornell and Purdue Universities), Silent Erasure: A Satellite Investigation of the Destruction of Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan (2022), Executive Summary and Methodology. Forensic documentation of the systematic destruction of 108 sites between 1997 and 2011. [open access, 38 pp.]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Francesco Bandarin and Ron van Oers, The Historic Urban Landscape: Managing Heritage in an Urban Century (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), Chapter 3, pp. 43–62.
- Robert Bevan, The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War, 2nd ed. (Reaktion Books, 2016), Chapter 1, pp. 11–40.
- ICOMOS, 'Heritage at Risk: World Report 2006/2007 on Monuments and Sites in Danger,' selected country case studies.
- Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (HERI, Ukraine) and UNESCO, damage assessments of cultural sites in Ukraine, selected entries. [open access, online]

Content note: This session discusses the destruction of cemeteries and religious sites, and includes photographic and satellite documentation. Participants may step away at any point.

Week 6 – War, Language, and Digital Memory

This week turns to the relationship between war, language, and historical memory in digital space. Armed conflict often intensifies disputes over place names, historical figures, monuments, national narratives, and linguistic identity. Wikipedia articles may become arenas where competing versions of history are negotiated, challenged, or imposed.

We will examine how language choice, translation, naming conventions, and source selection influence the representation of war and cultural memory. The session will show how terminology can either preserve historical specificity or dilute it. For example, shifts from precise legal, cultural, or historical terms to broader neutral-sounding labels may affect how readers understand responsibility, agency, and cultural loss.

Examples may include Ukraine, the Balkans, the South Caucasus, the Middle East, or other conflict-affected regions. The session encourages participants to see language not simply as a medium of description, but as a political tool in the construction of digital memory.

Key questions:

- How does war change the language of public memory?
- Why do disputes over names, categories, and translations matter?
- How can Wikipedia articles participate in the construction or weakening of historical memory?

Required Readings

- Astrid Erll, 'Towards a Conceptual Foundation for Cultural Memory Studies,' in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, eds., *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 1–18. [Full chapter]
- Case dossier: the 'Kyiv' / 'Kiev' renaming on English Wikipedia. Selected threads from the 2020 move discussions at Talk:Kyiv (archives), with the Slate report 'How the Russian Invasion of Ukraine Is Playing Out on English, Ukrainian, and Russian Wikipedia' (2 March 2022) as orientation. A seventeen-year naming dispute, readable in full, in which the arguments are all on the record. [open access, online]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (Basic Books, 2015), Introduction, pp. xxi–xxviii.
- Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), Introduction, pp. 1–11.
- Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), Chapter 1, pp. 1–40.

Week 7 – Gendered Erasure: Women, Notability, and Digital Visibility

This session addresses the gendered dimensions of digital visibility. Women scholars, artists, activists, political figures, and historical actors are often underrepresented on Wikipedia or subjected to stricter scrutiny through notability debates and source

requirements. We will examine how structural inequalities in publishing, archives, media coverage, and academic recognition affect whether women are considered “notable” enough to be represented.

The session also introduces feminist approaches to knowledge production, asking how supposedly neutral editorial rules may reproduce gendered exclusions. Participants will consider how gendered erasure operates not only through the absence of articles, but also through article framing, biographical emphasis, categorization, and the disproportionate questioning of expertise or significance.

Participants will consider how initiatives such as edit-a-thons and feminist digital humanities projects respond to these gaps.

Key questions:

- How do notability rules interact with historical inequalities in archives and publishing?
- Why are women and gender-marginalized figures often more vulnerable to deletion or minimization?
- What can feminist digital humanities contribute to knowledge repair?

Required Readings

- Siân Evans, Jacqueline Mabey, Michael Mandiberg, and Laurie Meyers, ‘Editing for Equality: The Outcomes of the Art+Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thons,’ *Art Documentation* 34:2 (2015), pp. 194–203. [Full article]
- Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,’ *Feminist Studies* 14:3 (1988), pp. 575–599. [Full article]
- Wikipedia, ‘Notability’ policy page and ‘Notability (people)’. [online]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Francesca Tripodi, Ms. Categorized: Gender, Notability, and Inequality on Wikipedia (New Media & Society, 2023), selected pages.
- Emily Temple-Wood, ‘Why I Keep Editing Wikipedia Despite All the Harassment,’ *Slate* (2015).

Note on the Haraway reading: Haraway is conceptually demanding and was not written for this audience. Required pages are 575–583; the remainder is optional.

Week 8 – Diaspora, Minority Memory, and the Limits of “Reliable Sources”

This session focuses on communities whose histories are dispersed across borders, languages, institutions, and generations. Diaspora communities, stateless peoples, Indigenous communities, refugees, and endangered heritage groups often preserve memory through oral history, family archives, community publications, religious institutions, or fragile local records.

Yet Wikipedia's reliance on published and institutionally recognized "reliable sources" can make such knowledge difficult to include. We will examine how source hierarchies can unintentionally reproduce archival inequality and silence communities whose histories have already been marginalized.

The session will ask a central ethical question: how can open knowledge platforms protect against misinformation while also avoiding the exclusion of communities whose histories were never fully preserved by dominant institutions? Participants will think about alternative documentation practices and the challenges of making vulnerable knowledge visible without appropriating it or exposing communities to harm.

Key questions:

- When does "reliable sourcing" become a barrier to marginalized memory?
- How do archives, language hierarchies, and institutional recognition shape Wikipedia visibility?
- What ethical responsibilities arise when documenting vulnerable heritage online?

Required Readings

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995), Chapter 1 'The Power in the Story,' pp. 1–12.
- Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007), Introduction, pp. 1–8. [Full introduction]
- Wikipedia, 'Reliable sources' and 'Identifying reliable sources' policy pages. [online]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (Northwestern University Press, 2018), Chapter 2, pp. 33–60.
- Kim TallBear, 'Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry,' *Journal of Research Practice* 10:2 (2014), Article N17.
- Achal Prabhala, Priya Sen, and Zen Marie, *People Are Knowledge* (Wikimedia Foundation Oral Citations Project, 2011), documentary film, 40 min., and the project report on Meta-Wiki. An attempt to admit oral sources to Wikipedia, and an instructive account of why the community rejected it. [open access]

Week 9 – From Wikipedia to AI: How Contested Knowledge Travels

This week examines what happens when Wikipedia content moves beyond the platform itself. Wikipedia is widely reused by search engines, knowledge panels, educational resources, digital assistants, and AI systems. As a result, biased, incomplete, or manipulated content may be amplified and presented to users as neutral knowledge.

We will discuss how digital infrastructures create chains of authority, where a contested Wikipedia article can influence what appears in search results, classroom materials, automated summaries, or machine-generated answers. The session will connect Wikipedia

manipulation to broader questions of data extraction, algorithmic authority, and the circulation of cultural narratives across platforms.

Participants will consider why small changes in Wikipedia can have large consequences once they are absorbed into larger information ecosystems. The session will also introduce the idea of “downstream harm”: the possibility that manipulated or incomplete digital knowledge becomes harder to correct once it is copied, indexed, summarized, or reused by automated systems.

Key questions:

- How does Wikipedia content travel into other digital systems?
- Why can manipulated knowledge become more powerful after it leaves Wikipedia?
- What are the risks when AI systems reproduce contested cultural narratives without context?

Required Readings

- Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (NYU Press, 2018), Introduction, pp. 1–10.
- Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (Yale University Press, 2021), Introduction ‘The Smartest Horse in the World.’ [Full introduction]
- Wikimedia Foundation, ‘Wikidata and the knowledge panel’ – documentation on how structured data from Wikidata and Wikimedia Commons is reused by search engines and assistants. Article text is only one of the pipelines; structured data is frequently the one that reaches the reader. [online]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Meredith Broussard, *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World* (MIT Press, 2018), Chapter 3, pp. 41–62.
- Mykola Makhortykh et al., ‘High-Risk Memories? Comparative Audit of the Representation of Second World War Atrocities in Ukraine by Generative AI Applications’ (2024), Abstract and Introduction.

Week 10 – Digital Resistance: Repair, Documentation, and Knowledge Justice

The final session focuses on strategies for resisting digital erasure and repairing damaged knowledge systems. We will discuss practical and ethical responses, including edit-a-thons, community archives, multilingual documentation, heritage databases, digital preservation projects, counter-mapping, open datasets, and collaborations between scholars, activists, cultural institutions, and affected communities.

Participants will reflect on the limits and possibilities of platform-based repair. Can Wikipedia be repaired from within? When are external archives, community-controlled

databases, or alternative digital infrastructures necessary? What does responsible intervention look like when cultural heritage is politically contested or communities are at risk?

The seminar concludes by asking what knowledge justice might mean in practice: not simply adding missing information, but changing the structures that determine whose memory becomes visible, credible, and preserved. The final discussion will invite participants to identify transferable skills from the seminar – critical reading, terminological awareness, source evaluation, edit-history analysis, and recognition of discursive manipulation – and apply them beyond Wikipedia to social media, news coverage, educational materials, museum discourse, and AI-generated content.

Key questions:

- What forms of digital repair are possible on Wikipedia, and what are their limits?
- How can scholars and communities document contested heritage ethically?
- What would knowledge justice look like in digital public culture?

Required Readings

- Kim Gallon, 'Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities,' in Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, eds., *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp. 42–49. [Full article, open access]
- Kiley Jolicoeur, Anna Kijas, and Anna Rakityanskaya, 'Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online: A Global Initiative,' *Ukrainian Cultural Studies* 2:11 (2022), pp. 87–89. [https://doi.org/10.17721/UCS.2022.2\(11\).17](https://doi.org/10.17721/UCS.2022.2(11).17) [Full article, 3 pp.]

Optional / Recommended Readings

- Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (Northwestern University Press, 2018), Introduction, pp. 1–10.
- Marisa Elena Duarte, *Network Sovereignty: Building the Internet Across Indian Country* (University of Washington Press, 2017), Introduction, pp. 1–8.
- Tara McPherson, 'Why Are the Digital Humanities So White? Or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation,' in *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2012), pp. 139–160.