

Writing women of science back into history



Female scientists and engineers at Edinburgh Napier University learned how to edit Wikipedia to ensure that women in scientific fields get their rightful place in history.

They are using the example of Hollywood beauty Hedy Lamarr, whose contribution to science has been overshadowed by her stellar film career.

Staff and students at the university staged a special "Editathon" to ensure that any scientific details of a string of leading female thinkers is not overlooked by future generations.

One of their targets was the Wikipedia page for raven-haired screen siren Lamarr, who starred opposite Victor Mature in 40s epic Samson and Delilah, directed by Cecil B DeMille.

Her entry was edited to include more information on her role in the invention of Frequency Hopping Spectrum, which meant messages could be sent without being detected, deciphered or jammed. Her ideas paved the way for modern spread-spectrum communication technology such as Bluetooth and OFDM, which is used in Wi-Fi connections.

Organisers of the Editathon drew up a list of women computer scientists, engineers and mathematicians who either had no profile on online encyclopedia Wikipedia or one which did not reflect their true standing.

The event at the Glassroom on the university's Merchiston campus began with a training session on Wiki editing by Sara

Thomas, Wikimedian in Residence at Museum Galleries Scotland.

The volunteers then set about their task of writing women back into history with gusto. By the end of the Editathon they had created three new Wikipedia entries from scratch.

A further 10 articles on women in the STEM disciplines of science, technology, engineering and maths were expanded upon or improved.

The entry on Lamarr – who starred with Spencer Tracy, Clark Gable and James Stewart in popular films of the 30s and 40s – was edited to include more detail on her scientific work with composer George Antheil for which she was posthumously inducted into the Inventors Hall of Fame in 2014.

Ann Macintosh, emeritus professor of digital governance at the University of Leeds, who worked with the Scottish Parliament on creating an e-petitions system, was given her own new profile.

And the existing article on eminent Greek university professor and [Byzantinologist](#) Helene Ahrweiler was reinforced with new material courtesy of a Greek academic who was able to translate information about her background.

Editathon organiser Debbie Ratcliffe, a student project officer at Edinburgh Napier, was thrilled that the Women's History Month event on March 4 had shone a spotlight on the work of a number of leading female scientists and engineers.

She said: "What was achieved on the day was fantastic in such a short period of time. What started as simply an event to increase the amount of articles on women in STEM fields on Wikipedia soon became an opportunity for students and staff to learn a completely new skill.

"Everyone was surprised at how easy it was to edit Wikipedia, and also how enjoyable it was. The hope is that all the

attendees will carry on editing and that we have made some small contribution to the number of female editors on Wikipedia. It is also hoped that female representation in STEM fields on Wikipedia continues to be added to and enhanced.”

The event, which involved around 20 staff and students mostly from the School of Computing and the School of Engineering and the Built Environment, comes as the Wikipedia Foundation strives to increase the number of female editors which was as low as 13 per cent four years ago.

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