Establishing a Critical Digital Commons Research Network

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What is the event or activity you want to organize?

This proposal seeks to fund initial activities involved in the establishment of a "Critical Digital Commons Research Network" in 2025. These activities will gather researchers who will examine the digital commons and its connections from infrastructural, political-economic, policy, and other critical approaches. This network aims to examine the role, importance, and impact of different aspects and areas of the digital commons, particularly Wikimedia projects, and to foster relationships and mentorships for researchers in this area.

This establishment will result in three main objectives for the year: 1) Creation of a framework and resource list for educating new researchers (both graduate students and researchers wishing to approach the commons) that helps to guide them to understand the complexity of spaces like Wikipedia. 2) Creating a mentorship program to bring new scholars into the network and to work with the established senior scholars. 3) The creation and attendance of a symposium to discuss current research and new research trajectories annually. This symposium will bring together critical infrastructural, political economic, and policy-oriented researchers focused on Wikimedia and other commons-based knowledge systems. In addition to creating a space for discussing and reviewing research in this area, it will also be open to new scholars to join, as it will be held in conjunction with the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) annual conference, a premier annual conference drawing focusing solely on Internet research. AoIR 2025 is held in São Paulo Brazil in October, and, depending on timing, we can either hold this pre-conference officially or "unofficially" this year, with the intent to establish this as an annual meeting in conjunction with AoIR.

This new network will begin with three established scholars across the globe, both all long-standing members of AoIR and veteran researchers of Wikipedia, Wikimedia, and the Commons. Establishing this research network will help to build community connections in this research area as well as begin to train, mentor, and establish new research trajectories for scholars from all over the world. This will greatly assist not only WMF but other major commons-based organizations to communicate fiscal needs, illustrate the strength and value of the communities, and help to better communicate connectivity, value, and opportunity to funders and policymakers.

What do you want to achieve by doing this community building activity?

By establishing a network of Wikipedia researchers focused on infrastructural, political economic, and policy-oriented approaches to understanding Wikipedia and its sister projects

(as well as other commons-based knowledge and information systems), this proposed activity will help to establish better cohesion, linkage, and coordination between researchers that are often working independently, or in smaller cells.

The intention of this proposal is to establish a critical mass of research expertise that allows both collaboration between established researchers as well as a locus for new connections and mentorship of new researchers seeking to establish new research agendas aligned with the group.

This network will branch over three different institutions, headed by PI Zachary McDowell at the University of Illinois at Chicago, alongside Heather Ford at the University of Technology Sydney, and Steven Jankowski at the University of Amsterdam. All three of the founding leaders have published prolifically in these areas, connecting and understanding the commons as infrastructural to the knowledge systems, to education, to the Internet and new media technologies, and more. Their expertise will help to bridge other researchers to create a larger umbrella research network that helps to ensure continued rigor and publication in these areas.

Plans for longevity

This is the first step to establishing a larger research collective and, eventually, a research institute co-located across the University of Illinois at Chicago, the University of Technology Sydney, and the University of Amsterdam. These will act as hubs for both established scholars as well as mentoring new scholars who wish to study these types of organizations and ecologies, helping to build a better understanding of the need for better support for the commons.

Since it takes time to cultivate and maintain an expansive and effective research community, we anticipate applying again for this grant in subsequent years.

Next year we plan on coordinating a symposium at Steve Jankowski's university that will coincide with the Digital Methods Summer School, an internationally renowned event that has been instrumental in developing both Wikipedia research tools and scholarly connections.

Additionally, along with the stated outcomes (listed below), we intend in the future to bring these learnings and research outputs to local and international Wikimedia conferences, such as Wikiconference North America, Wikimedia Research Wiki Workshop, and Wikimania.

When do you plan to host the event/activity? What is influencing the timing of the event?

The main activity, the symposium, will be held at AoIR 2025 in São Paulo Brazil, scheduled for October 15-18. We would create this as a one-day preconference on October 14th. The additional activities will be accomplished asynchronously and in other meetings throughout the year.

Who will participate in your event/activity?

Primary participation will consist of the three named researchers, current contacts within the research area, as well as potentially others from AoIR, as this preconference will be open to anyone who wishes to participate. This event will be oriented toward researchers who already study the Internet, but may not have been involved in commons-based research yet. The symposium will feature presentations from PIs

as well as present frameworks for approaching the commons, encouraging further participation.
One of these frameworks that will be discussed is the "Manifesto for Wikipedia Research" authored by Heather Ford and Steve Jankowski, amongst others. This manifesto lays out multiple approaches, assumptions, and trajectories that have and will guide the network. Additionally, co-PIs will share recent research and discuss research approaches.

This participation establishes and advances a larger research program that addresses Wikimedia and other commons-based knowledge and data platforms with a critical lens to infrastructure, political economy, education, and internet governance and policy. This will help to connect researchers with each other and create better frameworks for the mentorship of early career researchers in this area. With this in mind, we will ensure that early career researchers are supported by including two travel scholarships and presentation slots for the symposium.

While many researchers in this area, particularly the PIs, are acquainted with each other through long-standing research relationships, this symposium and research network will help to formalize these relationships and partnerships, opening up avenues to invite new researchers to collaborate. It is our intent to recruit participants from many underrepresented communities, particularly from South America, Eastern Europe, and South Asia.

We expect to cap the first symposium at 40 participants in order to manage the conversations and grow the group slowly. The PI Zachary McDowell, as well as network leaders Heather Ford, and Steve Jankowski will lead the shaping of the program, with preliminary commitment from longstanding collaborators already, such as Matthew Vetter, Nathaniel Tkacz, Michael Falk, Andrew Illiadis, and Jialei Jiang, amongst others.

Where will the event/activity take place?

The symposium will be held in São Paulo Brazil in October 2025. Other activities will be done remotely at the PI's institutions.

Experience organizing similar events or activities

The founding participants in this network have decades of event and community-building experience. PI Zachary McDowell is on the board of Directors of a community nonprofit in Southside Chicago and helps to organize a dozen or more community events a year, as well as organizing numerous pre-conference events for the Social Media and Society conference and several Wikipedia edit-a-thons. Steven Jankowski and Heather Ford have run numerous events, including edit-a-thons and medium-sized conferences.

The selected research of network members is highlighted in the Selected Bibliography section.

Specific outputs

Outputs will include:

1) Establishment of a web presence that highlights the group's membership and directives.
2) The creation and attendance of a first symposium for discussing current research and new research trajectories at AoIR 2025.
3) Creating a preliminary framework and resource list for guiding new and established researchers to understand the complexity of commons-based

spaces like Wikipedia. The three network leaders will collaborate on producing the initial versions of this resource at https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:Resources and then invite symposium attendees to expand it.

4) The creation of a preliminary mentorship program to bring new scholars into the network and work with the established senior scholars.
5) A "State of the Field" report that synthesizes the concerns, trajectories, and gaps that attendees identify in their presentations and comments. This will be shared with the Wikimedia research and user communities.

There is an allocated budget for administrative and communication costs for post-symposium discussion and coordination. PI will be responsible for reporting outcomes and planning for future conferences and meetings.

Evaluation

Evaluation of this preliminary effort will be based on the completion of the above outputs and the successful completion of the symposium. Establishing these preliminary output goals is key to establishing future annual goals based on growth and research publication output, as well as establishing future goals for the research network.

Budget

Please see the Budget Document: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YgoAdIkTyrY4z7E-PjX74taLRw5s9jUU32BIZG-vkCA/edit?gid=0#gid=0

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