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Kashmir Hill, Forbes Staff
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Sue Gardner On 'Herding Cats' And Halting Wikipedia's Editor Erosion

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Wikimedia Foundation executive director Sue Gardner scored a place on the Forbes Power Woman list this year thanks in part to her role in increasing the dollars flowing into the world's favorite free encyclopedia. Last year, Wikipedia brought in [\\$27 million](#) in public support and program revenue; this year, it's on track to bank \$36.1 million from its fund-raising efforts..



Sue Gardner, Executive Director of the Wikimedia Foundation. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

Despite the money rolling in, Wikipedia faces challenges. The biggest one is a decline in editors and admins willing to volunteer their services in curating the sum of all human knowledge. The number has been declining since 2006, says Gardner. (See these scary charts from [The Atlantic](#).) Over the past year they've slowed the rate of decline, says Gardner; now they're working on keeping their volunteer all-stars and deepening the bench.

Sue Gardner: WikiMedia's Cat Herder? [Like](#) [More info](#)

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Forbes Staff
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I'm a privacy pragmatist, writing about the intersection of law, technology, social media and our personal information. If you have story ideas or tips, e-mail me at khill@forbes.com. I'm a staff writer at Forbes now, but I've hung out in quite a few newsrooms over the last few years. Most recently, I was an editor at [Above the Law](#), a legal

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“When Wikipedia first started, the only people interacting on the Internet were hard core geeks,” said Gardner in a recent interview. “Now everyone is there, and they’re attracted to the easy, free ways to interact. It’s a funny habit to write encyclopedia entries. It’s not a mass taste. There are also lots of increasingly interesting places for people who are like Wikipedians to go, like [Quora](#) or [StackOverflow](#), where discussions are happening, where people can scratch that same itch to learn or to instruct someone else. So probably some of it is erosion from other interesting places to spend your time on the Internet.”

In order to increase the number of editors, the Wikimedia Foundation — the non-profit arm that supports Wikipedia — has started recruiting in Brazil and India and is more heavily recruiting females (who make up just 10-15% of editors now). Expanding the world of editors has additional benefits beyond halting the editor erosion.

“We think it’s important because Wikipedia’s promise to people is that we’ll bring them the sum of all human knowledge, and we don’t want to just bring them the sum of male knowledge or global North knowledge,” says Gardner. “The percentage of editors from Africa very low, and thus our coverage of Africa isn’t very good. We have more articles about New York City than we have about some countries in Africa. The same is true for gender... If only 10 to 15% of editors are women, topics of interest to women aren’t going to be as excellently covered as they otherwise would be. It’s not a moral, ideological or feminist issue; it’s an issue of quality. We want to bring the sum of all human knowledge to everybody and we can’t do that unless everybody’s at the table.”

And like everybody else, they’re trying to tap the mobile market, and make it easier for editors to make contributions via smartphones and tablets.

“I am very aware of the fact that it’s highly unlikely anyone will write an article via their mobile phone,” says Gardner. “I’ve done it but it’s painful. And it’s not just about the small keyboard and the small screen — though that’s awful. It’s the emotional experience of writing an article. It’s sitting down, maybe with some books and fifteen tabs open on your machine and in the creative process where you’re losing yourself... And so you’re not going to do that while you’re waiting for the bus or in line at the bank. But we building mobile contribution tools so its easier to upload images or check for vandalism — things that phones are good at.”

Gardner is an easy pick for anyone making a list of “ladies in technology,” but it’s funny to her that she’s on that list.

“People say to me that I’m a role model in technology, but it makes me laugh, because I’m not a technologist, I’m a journalist — that’s my background,” she says. “I’m a manager of technological projects and works but I’m not myself a Linux Kernel coder.”

Before joining the Wikimedia Foundation in 2007, Gardner was a journalist at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Moving to the Valley was a bit of a culture shock.

“When I came to the Bay area, the first thing I did was to talk to a bunch of people who run start-ups, who have money and made money from technology,” she says. “I did not see a single women on that entire tour who was not bringing us drinks in the conference rooms and answering phones. That was extraordinary coming from the CBC where it was all women.”

Her background in communication has been crucial for her ability to lead at Wikimedia Foundation. The Foundation operates and manages Wikipedia’s projects. Half of their budgets go to tech bills — paying for bandwidth, servers, and the engineers who keep the site running. The other half goes towards legal, the rest of the staff, and editor support, a.k.a. “community cat-herding.”

When Gardner first got her job at Wikimedia, one of her friends called it “ridiculous”. “No one has to do anything you tell them to do,” he said. “It’s a ridiculous job.”

“There are 80,000 active editors,” she says. “And they don’t have to do anything I tell them. It requires me to be really persuasive and a very good communicator. I don’t have a stick. All I have is my ability to persuade. It calls for pure perfect idealized leadership because there’s nothing else to work with. There’s no bonus scheme or a firing threat.”

For Wikipedia lovers who have gotten [a wee bit tired](#) of seeing founder Jimmy Wales’s face at the top of the page during fundraising campaigns, there’s some good news for you. The personal appeal from the founder is “the most effective fundraising tool we have,” says Gardner. But the addition in recent years of photos of the editors and staff behind Wikipedia — such as an Indian editor, a New York woman who’s an expert in mollusks, and site engineers — have been very successful as well.

“Wikipedia is built by a global body of people and we wanted to showcase that,” says Gardner. “Our previous year was Jimmy-heavy. In the last fundraiser we used Jimmy less, and that was successful. We’re going to do it next year, and again there will be less Jimmy, and more showcasing of individuals.”

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