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## **Jess Baines**

### Engaging (past) participants: the case of radicalprintshops.org

In the assembly of contemporary digital technologies, wikis are amongst those heralded for their democratic and ‘participatory’ potential. From the ambitious scale of Wikipedia to the more modest scope of the school classroom, wikis have been adopted to co-produce and share knowledge. In relation to the latter Robert Fitzgerald (2007: 680) argues that ‘the wiki approach’ to learning is consistent with the constructionist educational theory perspective that knowledge is ‘neither received or found’ but produced in interaction with other humans and tools. There has been significant research into the use of wikis in a variety of contexts, as the nine thousand pages of *WikiPapers* testify.<sup>1</sup> Regarding the use of wikis *in* academic research, they are mostly utilized as a means for closed groups to manage research data rather than as a method *for* research. This chapter describes an experiment to mobilize this potential through the instigation of an open access wiki, *radicalprintshops.org*. This wiki was conceived as adjunct to and part of a research project I had recently undertaken. It was partly an attempt to balance the nature of the academic research process and final form with that which was more aligned to the collectivist politics and practices of my subjects. The aspiration was also that it would engender their interest and generate new empirical material to draw on. Without losing sight of the potential and actual value for the principled *and* instrumental aims of *radicalprintshops.org*, the developing challenges and contradictions the experiment raised will also be discussed throughout this chapter.

#### **Someone should do a history before we all die**

The subject of my research was the history of the radical printshops collectives that had proliferated during the 1970s in the UK. Along with scores of others, I had spent several years working in them. The impetus to make them a subject of research grew out of conversations at a 2007 anniversary celebration of one of the last remaining shops (Calverts

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<sup>1</sup> The *WikiPapers* site was set up in 2010 by Emilio Rodríguez-Posada “to create the most comprehensive literature compilation for this research area”. ([wikipapers.referata.com](http://wikipapers.referata.com))

Press in east London).<sup>2</sup> Whilst marveling at how this printshop had survived, we gossiped about all the others that long since disappeared. One person said, half jokingly, 'somebody should do a history before we all die'; there was a murmur of concurrence. 'Yeah but who would do it?' I asked. 'You could!'<sup>3</sup> The event itself and this exchange laid the seeds for my research proposal. Ideas for an oral history project, an exhibition, a book of images and anecdotes were all considered before eventually deciding the research should take a conventional academic form. I felt this would allow me to better explore the questions that were starting to present themselves. It was treating the history of the printshops, our history, as worthy of rigorous and sustained attention. I had also begun to think that given my own involvement, some kind of distance would better serve the endeavor. The decision to take this direction was not without ambivalence.

### **Problem context No.1**

My own experience in the printshops was mostly one of little respect for academic enquiry. During the 1980s there was spate of academic study into 'industrial democracy' and researchers frequently contacted the printshop I worked at. We constantly refused them, seeing it as a waste of our productive time and of no benefit. Underlying our dismissal was the view that the researcher's interest was probably a career-serving fad. Commitment meant 'doing', not 'observing' on a university grant or salary to produce information we knew already. Concerns about academic research and its subsequent 'value' for its subjects has become an ongoing theme in social movement studies, with much discussion about ethics, reciprocity, positionality, identity and so on (Croteau et al. 2005; Khasnabish & Haiven 2012; Milan 2014). Whilst scholars of radical movements and organizations might hope that their assiduously researched and analytical studies will in some way assist the future of progressive movements and organizations, their efforts tend to remain in inaccessible journals and textbooks. It is not simply the final form and dissemination of the research that may be at issue but the manner in which the research is conducted, and thus the kind of knowledge produced (Chesters 2012). As Gillan and Pickerill (2012) state, a key question becomes who is the research for?. Many of those engaged in such research are politically sympathetic to the movements and groups they study, and as in my own case have often been or are involved in them, which can make these issues especially resonant. The ways in

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<sup>3</sup> The suggestion was based on a haphazard career trajectory that led to employment as a lecturer in the printing trades college, now London College of Communication (LCC), as well as involvement in small publications and exhibitions.

which these issues can be addressed partly depends on the type of research and the researchers relationship to the subjects of study. While there is not space to expand here there have been various propositions and approaches advocated, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Militant Research, which in various ways are about politically engaged research that is 'with' rather than 'about' its subjects (see Kindon et al. 2010; Shukaitis et al. 2007; also Garelli & Tazzioli 2013). Once I had eventually embarked upon the research, recurring questions from people with printshop associations were, 'Where can we see what you are doing?', 'How will you make it available?', and 'Will we understand it?'.

## **Problem context No.2**

The printshops themselves had developed alongside the growth of 'history from below', oral history, community history and 'community archives' and the importance of these challenges to conventional history were assumed. Nevertheless, like most organizations of the alternative left, the printshops did not consider their own historical record, and as such — as I soon discovered — scant documentary evidence of them existed in archives and repositories. This presented one part of the ensuing research challenges. The problem of elusive remains is one common to both historians of grassroots activity and of marginalised lives (Black & MacRaild 2000). 'Fringe' social movement groups and 'alternative' organisations often fall into this category and as Bosi and Reiter (2014: 129) point out, due to their often "informal and fragmented nature produce and leave behind only in a limited way the same kind of evidence as classical organisations". Few do what they do with 'heritage' in mind, and may even deliberately leave minimal evidence for reasons of safety (Flinn 2008). The alternative left culture in the printshops grew up was also one in which an 'anti-bureaucratic' ethos often prevailed (Landry et al. 1985), with little importance attached to keeping records (Chong 2011; Swash 2011). While independent community and radical archives can sometimes provide vital sources of marginal or otherwise overlooked activity, such resources often exist in precarity due to lack of economic resources, space and the fluctuations of interested volunteers (Bosi & Reiter 2014).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, ideological or idiosyncratic rejections of storage, handling, access and cataloguing conventions can also frustrate the academic researchers expectations.

What evidential traces that still existed of the printshops were likely to be mainly in the hands (or dusty boxes) of ex-participants. This connected to another problem: while I had a small

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handful of ex-printshop contacts it was limited. The aims of my research were congruent with a qualitative rather than quantitative approach in that I sought to elicit detail, texture, experience and diversity to build a nuanced historical analysis (Flick 2007). The qualitative approach means the numbers of respondents or cases are “necessarily small” (Bauer & Gaskell 2009: 42). However not only were my contacts limited, they were inevitably prejudiced towards particular organisations. As Jolly, Russell and Cohn (2012) have discussed in relation to their Women’s Liberation Movement research, the recent history of radical organizations and movements raises particular problems of representation – who speaks or gets asks to speak, and within that whose version of the past prevails. If my research was going to be based on empirical data, be ‘properly historical’, rather than a more abstract theoretical consideration that drew on loose generalizations, there was an arduous task ahead of tracing as many ex-members as I could, and of persuading them to share information and be interviewed. Interviews would be a crucial tool for research given the apparently thin documentation of the printshops.

The issue of both finding interviewees and convincing them of the value of giving me their time was serious. This is a common problem for researchers (Seale et al. 2007), and with regard to locating subjects of marginal and no longer existing activities, this can be especially so (Rubin & Rubin 2011). However my own background as ex-printshop participant gave me a relatively privileged starting position in that a) I had some names and a few contacts already and b) our common history *might* provide some basis for trust. The printshops were also part of a wider alternative left milieu of politics, shared living, friendships and relationships and as such I anticipated that there would be some vestiges of this that would assist a ‘snowball’ of contacts. The ‘snowball sample’ is typically useful when, as Lorenzo Mosca (2014: 409) puts it, “focusing on hard to reach populations...[and] where the members know each other”. Concerning the issue of what value potential interviewees might cede to the research, the casual conversation that had prompted it provided some encouragement. Ex-members would also be of an age where their involvement might now be viewed as a distinct and possibly significant part of their own life history. Whether they would value an academic research project, want to discuss this period in their life or share their shoebox archives with me, was of course another matter. It was a long time ago and it was not part of a history that had been culturally validated since. For well over twenty years the collective experiments of the 1970s and 80s in working and living differently had essentially been consigned to the history-dustbin marked ‘uncool’ (Sholette 2011; see also Hesmondhalgh 2000). Edward Thompson’s (1968) memorable words that presaged the simultaneously flourishing movement for ‘history from below’, might well be applied to these

attempts: “Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes and the losers themselves are forgotten ...” (Thompson 1968: 12). As recently as 2007, Colin MacCabe and Stuart Hall agreed that the reason that these experiments had gone unwritten by those involved was that “it was too painful” (MacCabe 2007: 27). It is only recently, and really after I began the research, that this situation has been noticeably reversed.

The combination of these factors led to the decision to experiment with building a preliminary online resource, the open wiki, *radicalprintshops.org*, as an adjunct and possible aid to the academic research. In the first instance the site would serve to publically share the material I was finding. The anticipated ‘audience’ was printshop members and a wider activist and radical lay audience. The site seemed like a way to begin to bridge the gap between the formal process and outcome of the academic project and its subjects. It would hold documents, images and maybe participant accounts, operating as an organically developing open archive, a sort of niche knowledge commons. It would also start to give the history of the printshops a visible and affirmative online presence that printshop members unknown to me might encounter. I hoped that it would stimulate interest from ex-participants, individually and collectively in the *general* value of producing such a history. By setting the site up as a *wiki* it also held the possibility for them to contribute in their own time and terms, a sort of micro ‘crowdsourcing’ (Howe 2006) to begin to generate a loosely collaborative history.<sup>5</sup> Which in turn might provide new sources of information for my academic research. A wiki was not just practical for the task but its affordances for content collaboration seemed ideologically resonant with the historical background of the printshop collectives. The congruence of wikis with horizontal organizational structures and collective knowledge building has of course historical precedence in their use by *Indymedia Documentation Project*, as well as *ESF* (European Social Forum) groups in the early 2000s (Ebersbach & Glaser 2004; Pickerill 2006; Milberry 2012). More recently wikis are being used for a growing number of participatory digital history projects from *FoundSF* (<http://foundsf.org>), which gathers the history of alternative San Francisco to the *LGBT History Project* (<http://lgbthistoryuk.org>). As Andrew Flinn (2007) has articulated, the upsurge more generally of online ‘community archives’ and digital history projects are driven by the same impetus as

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<sup>5</sup> Howe, who coined the term crowdsourcing in a 2006 *Wired* article, defines it as “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined generally large group of people in the form of an open call” (Howe 2006: n.p.). The term crowdsourcing has been taken up by Mia Ridge (2014) in particular to describe initiatives towards digital participation in institutional cultural heritage projects.

the radical, community and oral history initiatives that were developed in the 1970s and 80s. The recent growth is not least because of the affordances of online technologies in creating virtual space for deposits and dispersed collaboration and access, overcoming some of the problems inherent to their location bound counterparts. Flinn has argued that the 'community archive', digital or not, presents a crucial challenge and opportunity for the mainstream archive by exposing their historic exclusion of "the voices of non-elites, the grassroots and the marginalised" (Flinn 2007: 152; see also Vincent 2014). Within recent years the archiving profession has grappled with notions of 'Archives 2.0' which Joy Palmer (2009) described as "less about the integration of Web 2.0 technologies ... and more related to a fundamental shift in perspective, to a philosophy that privileges the user and promotes an ethos of sharing, collaboration and openness" (Palmer 2009: n.p). The use of digital technology has played a core role in facilitating institutional attempts at this democratisation, from the digitization and online access to archives to the trialing of tools including 'wiki layers'<sup>6</sup> on such archives that enable users (lay or academic) to add supplementary content or tags and the creation of personal workspaces within archive sites (Howard & Hitchcock 2011; Ridge 2012; Craven 2012).

### **Setting up the wiki**

To some extent 'everyone' knows roughly what a wiki is, mainly because of Wikipedia (launched in 2001). In brief then, the first wiki software (WikiWikiWeb) was developed by Ward Cunningham in the mid 1990s to enable a community of software developers to work together. Wikis are web-based content management systems that allow users to collaborate on content asynchronously. They contain a series of extendable hyperlinked pages to which users can add, edit and delete information, alter the structure and so on. Every change is automatically recorded, viewable and reversible by users. Wikis use a very simplified mark up language and as such users require no knowledge of code, nor any specialist software or plugins. Cunningham described wikis as the "simplest online database that could possibly work" (2002: n.p.). To the present two basic applications for wikis have emerged. One is for a closed group to collaborate or share information and they have been taken up and promoted in various education, workplace and community settings to this effect. The other application, exemplified by Wikipedia but also of some of the examples above, is the open

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<sup>6</sup> In the UK for example the 'Your Archives' part of National Archives site and the Old Bailey Proceedings Online (OBPO) instigated wiki layers for users between 2007-2012 and 2009-2011 respectively.

(<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk>; see Howard & Hitchcock 2011)

model that allows anyone to contribute. A wiki also might be viewable across the web but only open to a closed group of contributors. Since Cunningham's WikiWikiWeb, numerous wiki clone software have been developed, including Mediawiki (which powers Wikipedia), TikiWiki and Foswiki.<sup>7</sup> TikiWiki (or Tiki) is a complex all in one content management system (CMS), wiki and groupware software that can be used for a wide variety of applications (web sites, portals, intranets, extranets) including online collaboration. Foswiki is designed for intra-organisational collaboration and sharing.

The decision about what particular wiki software to use for *radicalprintshops.org* was important. It had to be free for economic reasons, open source for ideological reasons and simple for practical reasons. Although I had a technically superior friend who volunteered to help me set up the wiki, I had to be able to administrate it myself without a steep learning curve. Equally, it had to be as accessible as possible for potential contributors. A key rule of any software implementation is undoubtedly 'know your users'. Knowledge of my potential users was limited. What I did know is that they were aged between 45 and 65. I suspected those most likely to contribute would be those for whom it was a significant part of their life. Given the 'heyday' of the printshops was between the early 1970s and 80s, they would probably be nearer the middle and older end of the age range above. The 'internet revolution' had had occurred during their adult lives but the degree of their active engagement with its tools and platforms for either work or play was unknown to me. However, given their technical background of printing and related processes (and developments within that such as Desktop Publishing), it was conceivable that at least some would have been early adopters. As for the 'gender technology' issue, despite being a conventionally male trade, there were many women involved in the printshops, actively challenging this (Cadman et al. 1981; Baines 2012). It was *possible* this had built confidence that carried over into using digital technologies. On the other hand involvement in printing could have been at least twenty years previous and as I later found out few women continued to do any sort of technical job. Based on these factors, along with observations of colleagues and friends in this demography, striving for lowest common denominator accessibility was clearly paramount. After research into the various wiki software, their requirements, affordances and ease of use, we decided on the free, open source DokuWiki, because it has low system requirements, does not require a database, and is particularly simple to use.

It also seemed important to try and make the site *look* accessible and ‘attractive’, subjective though the later is. The typical appearance of an unadorned wiki interface can look dull and ‘techy’ and thus potentially alienating for users. This concern also related to the shared print media background of members: working with type, images and color mostly develops some sort of design awareness. We adapted a ‘skin’ in DokuWiki to give the site a distinctive appearance. The theme colors were red and black, perhaps a little obvious for radical printshops with political origins that bore symbols of those colors, but it was also probably the most common color combination of ‘radical print’. This aestheticisation was not just ‘marketing’ but also a sort of basic ‘branding’, indicating that this was a particular history, not simply ‘so much data’.

The *radicalprintshops* wiki went live in February 2009. Next to an images of the cheap dilapidated press that was typical and the phrase ‘the freedom of the press belongs to those who run it’, taken from a 1970s poster made in one of the printshops called See Red Women’s Workshop, the text on the homepage declared:

*‘This site is devoted to building a history of London’s late 20th century radical and community printing collectives... This is a history that doesn’t exist except in the memories of ex-workers, friends and clients. The idea is that people who were involved in the printshops can create and edit the pages.’*

Following instructions on how to register as a user, the home page showed the index of the different pages so far created (‘namespaces’ in wiki-language). These were for the

start [radical printshops]

http://radicalprintshops.org/dokuwiki/doku.php

radical & community printshops WIKI CONTACT

Security alert. Local file inclusion bug. More info here, fixed release available. [18] (what's this?)

[[start]] RADICAL PRINTSHOPS

Edit this page Old revisions Recent changes Search

Trace: » calverts\_north\_star\_press » union\_place » start

This site is devoted to building a history of London's late 20th century radical and community printing collectives; the poster collectives, the service printers and typesetters, the print resource centres. This is a history that doesn't exist except in the memories of the ex-workers, friends and clients. The idea is that people who were involved in the printshops can create and edit the pages. You need to register and get a password to do this. Just click on the login link at the bottom right of this page and it will take you to a dialogue box with a link to register.

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**the freedom of the press belongs to those who control the press**

The printshops have been divided up into three categories; service printers, community printshops and poster collectives. Some appear in more than one than one category. The service printers basically did the printing for you, the community printshops showed you how to do it and the poster collectives... designed posters. Radical typesetters have been included in with service printers. There is a separate resources section (scroll down this page) for digital archives of related documents, pamphlets, articles etc.

printshops I already knew of; names, locations and approximate duration. I uploaded pictures and documents from my personal archive along with images of materials that bore the imprint of specific printshops. I created lists of links to radical archives and libraries, along with articles relating to the history of alternative print media. I added more of everything as I found it. I worked on the assumption that the more content the site had, the more it would encourage others to contribute. Sometimes the only information I had was the name of a printshop and very approximate dates, however setting up pages in advance also made it simpler for people to add content.

Once the site had sufficient information to look like a viable concern I began publicizing it. I left messages and links on politically resonant sites, where printshops members might lurk or have friends that did, such as marxists.org and libcom.org, and continued to do so as new radical history sites sprung up. I emailed the slowly growing number of printshop workers I was obtaining contacts for. The link to the wiki served to introduce the idea of a history of the printshops, and showed the beginnings of a visible and accessible outcome, which I hoped might be a hook to encourage participation. If people were interested in the wiki they might also be interested further down the line in being interviewed by me, and I used this email to introduce the research project. The response towards both the wiki and the academic research was generally encouraging. At this stage I had not put any information on the site about who had instigated it, or that its instigator was doing academic research into the subject, although this information appeared elsewhere online (e.g., my university profiles).

Over a four-year period about 35 people registered as radicalprintshop.org users, most of them within the first two years of its inception. Although not a large number it was more than I had expected. Throughout this time I periodically emailed my contact list of printshop members with updates about the wiki and to encourage contributions. Twenty-three of the 35 registered actually *contributed* content, ten of them by directly uploading and the remaining 13 by sending contributions through the wiki's contact form or by email, for me to upload. The explanation given by some for the latter was that they either weren't confident to upload themselves or that they had tried and failed. By the end of 2013, eight of the 40 pages/namespaces on the wiki had been set up by registered users and 25 different pages/namespaces contributed to. There were perhaps four 'super contributors', although I remained the key contributor by far. Content added ranged from cursory to extensive printshop biographies, personal photographs and memories, lists of printing equipment and images of work printed. Some pages bulged; some were still scant. There was a marked profile of those that contributed: they had either worked in several printshops, or been a founder member of a press. This was unsurprising, greater length of involvement and/or

intense 'start up' commitment would have made their time in the printshops a significant period in their lives and as such probably a greater motivation or interest in their 'historicization'. Those that registered were overwhelmingly male, but two (half) of the 'super contributors' were female. Of the people that uploaded, I was in contact with only two of them when the wiki launched. Overall I had previously known less than a quarter of those that contributed and over half of those that contributed had found the site independently. The wiki was almost universally appreciated by the ex-members I made contact with ('great stuff', 'brilliant', 'it's nice to be acknowledged!', 'so much of this history is invisible'). As such it was productive in gathering support and interest for the research and helped to both introduce it and legitimize it. My knowledge of the scope of different printshops significantly expanded and it quickly began to function as a useful *organizational* tool for the research, revealing gaps and relationships. Interest from printshop members in different parts of the UK enlarged the original scope of the wiki and the research beyond its original London focus. It developed many fruitful new contacts that were more than willing to be interviewed and to share old documents, offline, with me. It also generated wider interest and connections, especially from peers in the US with similar printshop interests and backgrounds and led to ongoing reciprocal information sharing and support.

### **Challenges: No.1**

One of the risks of initiating a 'collaborative history', however informally, is that conflicting versions of events lead to unresolved and confusing content, can cause friction between individuals and deter involvement. The so-called 'edit war' is of course a well-known phenomenon of Wikipedia (Tkacz 2014). In the case of *radicalprintshops* this could take on a very different tenor because the subject was people's *own* history and personal understanding of what 'had happened' and/or why and with people they had once or still knew. While the site was intended to be a positive recognition of that history, like most collective projects (or indeed any kind of organization) the printshops had their share of internal conflicts, people that did not get on. In my academic research this was of interest — and the responsibility for a broader interpretation, mine. The wiki was another matter. Concern about this had been flagged up early on after a reunion of some print co-op members, with one person emailing me to say, 'I must admit I was slightly concerned how time had changed some events and facts, but hopefully you will solve all that'. The wiki certainly could not 'solve all that'.

This aspect of co-writing history remained a particularly hindering factor for a couple of contributors and came up in several email exchanges: “Such a wiki raises all sorts of questions about who and what exactly can be mentioned/quoted/talked about without their permission. Also about who writes which history”; “how is collective writing managed in ‘ethical’ and practical terms... perhaps there is a universally known manual of such things somewhere on the web?”; “still somewhat perplexed as to how a wiki works in terms of contributions, reconciling everyone’s tendency to rewrite history”. Although one of these people made a significant entry about the printshop he was involved in, uncertainty about these questions meant he felt unable to encourage the contribution of others from the press, as he didn’t feel he could offer them any guidance.

Given the amount of time passed I had hoped that old conflicts would be ‘water under the bridge’ by now. With regard to different versions of events, I had attempted to set the namespace/pages to allow for multiple perspectives. Cap (2012) has since proposed something similar with his proposal for ‘every point of view’ (EPOV) knowledge bases rather than the ‘neutral point of view’ (NPOV) target of Wikipedia. This seemed more appropriate for a collaborative history of this kind, given the history was that of the people contributing. I doubted that people would want to contribute particularly ‘contentious’ content, although that was always a risk. The individual printshop pages had been set up with sections for ‘background’, ‘narratives’, ‘images’, ‘discussion’, ‘sources/links’. I had imagined that the general history would go into ‘background’ and personal stories into ‘narratives’, which is mainly what happened. Conceivably the latter would also be the space where specific versions of events could live. In actuality the issue barely arose. Also, despite or because of the anxieties above there was minimal editing of what others had written, people added without deletion. Where there was difference or (mild) criticism of content it came through to me to manage and I ended up editing it to fit both accounts. Nobody used the available discussion space.

Although the wiki enabled collaborative content there was not in any sense a *group* of ‘committed users’, either in relation to a particular press or the site overall. Even though there were certainly users from some of the same presses they never got into working together. In that sense the mode of participation was contributory rather than genuinely collaborative or co-creative (Bonney cited in Ridge 2014). Furthermore the wiki was not conceived of or set up collectively; there was no group discussion about how it might operate, the shape it should take or if there should be some sort of code of conduct. It was set up as a sort of ‘probe’ or experiment driven by my agenda; parts of which I hoped others might share. I was the unelected, unaccountable and effectively sole admin. I could block users,

limit access rights, delete namespaces and of course take down the site. This obviously is not an egalitarian situation. I had hoped that in time others might emerge as co-admins but had devised no strategy to especially encourage this — and no one was putting themselves forward. In a sense I was pleased anyone else contributed at all.

Preparatory research into setting up the wiki had been primarily technical. I provided no FAQs, guidelines or support manuals about how or what to write or edit. This was for various reasons; a) I wanted to see what happened, b) I did not know what such guidance would look like, c) I did not want to hinder participation through creating 'rules' that might be felt patronising, d) I hoped that how to do this would reveal itself (to me as well) through experiment rather than direction e) There was already enough to do! Retrospectively more support around the process in the provision of this sort of material is likely to have encouraged rather than dissuaded people to contribute. It would not have been a case of reinventing the wheel given that various existing wikis provide such guidelines that I could have drawn on and adapted.

## **Challenge No.2**

The other and more overwhelming issue that emerged was spam; the site was increasingly subject to attacks. Pages were frequently high jacked and filled with all manner of commercial junk. The emails that told me a new user had registered poured in from marauding bots. Block deleting them was risky, in case they contained a message from a human user. There might be 200 to go through at one time. Open registration on wikis makes them especially vulnerable to spambots, unless like Wikipedia you have the resources and technical infrastructure to counteract them. The time I spent on wiki admin, essentially clearing junk, increased exponentially, leaving little time for developing it, leave alone encourage people to contribute. I became cautious about publicizing the site in case I had not had time to remove offending spam. While I had the support of my technically superior comrade, who tried to help resolve these issues — we tried different CAPTCHA plugins for example — they inevitably returned. This is something that would have been eased with more sustained user commitment; removing spam from pages at least is a basic editing task. While 'wiki-gnome' and 'wiki-fairy' tasks were relatively satisfying, the lone role of 'housework zombie' was not.

The obvious way to address this would have been to cease open registration as this was what allowed spam into the site. Those already registered would still have their password and new users would make contact with the site admin to acquire one, which would be a sort

of filtering process. It creates another admin task but far less than dealing with spam. It also creates a direct relationship between the admin/myself and prospective contributors that on the one hand *may* have encouraged greater involvement. On the other hand it removes a level of autonomy and possible anonymity from the process, which might deter some people.

### **Challenge No.3**

This took a rather different shape. As the main contributor to the wiki I had been sharing materials gathered in pursuit of my 'original' and far from completed academic research. I had assumed interest in the wiki would be amongst ex-participants, the lay field of radical historians, artists and activists and curious others, (a few of whom were my students), but mainly beyond the bounds of serious professional and institutional interests. Within the field of media and communication studies too, my 'old media' subject was a marginal curio at best. However a revival of craft-based radicalism and an upsurge of art world interest in collectives of the 1970s and 80s began to generate a small but steady stream of attention and requests from this direction. Even the phrase 'radical and community printshops' that I'd used — and which had long ceased to exist as a meaningful coupling — began to circulate. A trickle of students from different art institutions now emailed me to help with their dissertations on 'radical and community printshops', having discovered the wiki. In 2012, a new book on radical posters came out and while skimming for possible research leads I had the dawning realization that significant information must have been derived from the wiki, and more precisely that which I had written. I scanned the bibliography for acknowledgement of this, but there was none. With some trepidation, I contacted the author who admitted that the wiki had indeed been a great help, and apologized for not having got in touch. A few months later another situation arose with a professional in the cultural field whose funded and well-regarded project was based on their 'research into radical and community printshops'. Again the sources of this research were derived from the wiki, similarly unacknowledged. More occurrences of this ilk arose.

On the one hand it was cheering that in a small way, the subject of the printshops had started to become 'hot' and that I seemed to have helped this along by making publically accessible hitherto unknown information and source material. It indicated the research subject was timely and that there was probably a wider audience than I had imagined. While I positively liked the fact that bits from the wiki were being pasted across the web on various radical websites, or individuals' blogs, unacknowledged use of the wikis content by paid 'professionals', particularly when presented as their own research, was disconcerting. I had spent a lot of unpaid time on the wiki, not just uploading and writing but managing the tech

issues as well as supporting and encouraging other users. My own academic work was a long way from completion, and its main strength was its original subject matter. As Dunleavy (2003) cautions research that is empirically rather than theoretically original is always vulnerable to losing this claim.<sup>10</sup> A tension had emerged between the aspirations for the wiki and the possible need to 'protect' my academic research interests.<sup>11</sup> In their user analysis of the Old Bailey Proceedings Online, Howard & Hitchcock also found that academics were put off from using the wiki function in part because "they are unwilling to share rough drafts of work with all comers... and in any case would probably not post something they may want to publish in a more formal context later" (2011: 8)

During this time I decided that it was prudent to put my own name somewhere on the wiki, state that I had initiated it and that it was an adjunct to academic research on the subject. However I could have put a request on the site for professionals in the academic and cultural field to reference the wiki. We had set a Creative Commons 'non-commercial reuse' and 'attribution required' terms of reuse for the site content, but this lingered as a tiny logo at the bottom of scrollable pages and was not drawn attention to. This could have been made more of.

### **Under maintenance**

After four years user contributions to the wiki had dwindled to near zero and the time I spent on it was mostly dealing with spam. Maintaining it with limited time, knowledge, resources and support was becoming untenable. Added to this I was the lingering concern about the extent to which I might have been unwittingly undermining my academic research and future publishing opportunities by making such a range of source material so publically available, before the completion of the my academic research project. Until I could work out a way to resolve these very different issues, I decided to archive the site and temporarily take it offline. This raised a new ethical consideration. Did taking it down invalidate the ethics of reciprocity that I had hoped the wiki might partially serve? What in this context was the site instigator and admin's responsibility to the others that contributed to the wiki? The situation exposed the asymmetrical relationship between myself, as sole admin, and the registered users, in terms of agenda, authority and labor. Unless users were willing or able to get more involved they had little say in decisions about the overall site management.

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<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

There is much that might be said in terms of how the *radicalprintshops* wiki could be better set up to facilitate a collaborative knowledge base and I have covered some aspects of this already. In the context of this book however it is the brief evaluation of it as an aid to academic research that I want to end on. Firstly the wiki helped to *socialize* the idea of a history of printshops amongst ex-participants. It enabled the renewal of communications with ex-colleagues and associates and the introduction to many more that I had never known. While the wiki's value for *direct* information gathering was limited, my knowledge of the scope of different printshops significantly expanded which was invaluable for the research. It also quickly began to function as a useful *organizational* tool for the research, revealing gaps and relationships. Finally and perhaps most instrumental to the research it developed many fruitful new contacts that were more than willing to be interviewed and dig through their personal documents to assist me. For many in fact this was preferable to contributing to the wiki. During the course of the research I interviewed about 70 people; double the number of registered wiki users.<sup>12</sup>

Initially the wiki had helped address the ambivalence I had regarding the distance between academic process and form and my subject/s. The timing of it for generating interest and contacts was at the right stage of the research; early on while I was working out what shape the project should take, what my questions were and what methods I was going to use. On the other hand it was possibly too early to experiment with building a collaborative history. I did not have sufficient resources (time and knowledge) to maintain the site effectively or to properly support contributors. I was also ignorant at the outset of what that might actually mean. It was also probably too early to be sharing much original research data on a public site. None of these issues are insurmountable, but all require preemptive consideration.

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