



Send for the Doctor

Tim Mendham interviews Guerrilla Skeptic Susan Gerbic on babies, red string, evil eyes, squiggly lines, fainting on stage, and the buzz of doing something practical for the skeptical movement.

Photo: Mal Vickers

Susan Gerbic describes herself as a ‘wikipediatrician’, someone who wants to mend the world of Wikipedia, one page at a time. The Californian has set up a group of like-minded people called Guerrilla Skepticism on Wikipedia, an editing team whose aim is to improve skeptical content on the online encyclopedia.

“We do this by improving pages of our Skeptic spokespeople, providing noteworthy citations, and removing the unsourced claims from paranormal and pseudoscientific pages. Why? Because evidence is cool.”

While in Australia for the Australian Skeptics National Convention in October in Brisbane, she ran workshops on editing Wiki pages and set up the Wiki entry for the Launceston Skeptics, completing it just minutes before this interview. But it’s not just skeptical pages that she works on. While in Sydney, she also worked on the pages for the Hyde Park Barracks, including adding a photo of rats that were instrumental in collecting and unintentionally saving much memorabilia from the building.

TM: Tell me about your background.

SG: I’m a baby photographer. I started in 1982, and we do school photos and portraits. I work inside a JC Penney store in Salinas, California. For 33 years I’ve watched kids grow up - I’ve photographed some who now have grandchildren. That’s why I’m a fast photographer not a high end art

photographer- let’s get this done really quick, now next, next. I’m really high energy. I get on the floor and roll around with babies. I’m just a big kid.

How many babies do you photograph naked on rugs?

None! That’s not considered hygienic anymore; we do them in diapers now.

The youngest I’ve done was, I think, 36 hours. We specialise in people who don’t want their picture taken – children, people who need business photos – people who say I really don’t want to be here. And after five minutes they leave and are really pleased with their photo.

When I get out of this tour I’m right into the Christmas season.

Most of our clientele are Spanish, and I’ve noticed a lot of babies coming in with a red string around their wrist. I saw that for a while and I finally asked one of the youngest mothers “What the heck is this?” and she told me what it is, and she told me it protected them from the evil eye. I looked at her and said, “This is the 21st century, are you seriously saying that a piece of red string is going to keep your kid from getting ill or attacked or keeping the evil eye or whatever?” And she said, “Oh, we don’t believe in it actually, but it keeps my mother and my grandmother happy, and I have to appease them. If I don’t have this string on then my grandmother’s going to



have a cow and she won't watch the baby and she's going to be so stressed out. So it's easier just to put the string on and that makes her happy."

Some people really believe their kid will get the evil eye.

Who from?

It's possibly me, because I've got blue eyes. In some cultures they think blue eyes are evil. If you look at a child and say how beautiful it is and you don't touch it, then you could be giving them the evil eye. But the act of touching the baby alleviates the evil eye.

But these are my clients and I really can't be making fun of them. I could probably just take photos of the hands of these children and show them to others.

Outside of the evil eye, have there been any other weird things you've come across in that work?

I had one woman who came into the camera room and told me that she was celebrating her 40th birthday. I said OK, put your purse on the floor. She said she couldn't – that it was bad luck. So she had to put it on an object. That stuck with me, and I thought about it for the longest time how I should have had a response without being snarky. Years later she came in for another birthday, and she had the same response. I said, wait a minute, I've taken your pictures before. And she said, well maybe. I looked different than before and I said someone like you came in years ago for their pictures on their 40th birthday and told me about their purse. She said, that was me. So I said, answer me this because it's something I've been thinking about for a while. If you're on an airplane, can you put your purse on the floor once you're in the air, because it's not actually on the ground any more. She said, of course not, that would be bad luck. I thought, what in the world. I think it's something about losing money; your money comes out of the purse or something like that.

How did you get involved in the Wikipedia activities?

I had been on skeptical cruises, attending lectures and a lot of different things. I'd got to know the community ... really nice people. I knew it was time for me to step up and get active. I'm very activist minded, I have good organisational skills and my kids had grown up, my job is relatively easy though it can be stressful on the day. I needed a project; I had no idea what the project would be. Maybe I should specialise in networking people who should know other people, and help the community that way.

But that wasn't really going to go very far.

So I was on a cruise and Tim Farley was talking about editing Wikipedia so I took some notes, did nothing about it, took some photos of Brian Dunning who was on the same cruise. I uploaded it because I knew it should be on Wikipedia, then I figured how to put it on his Wikipedia page. Then I said this Wikipedia page looks like crap, it's not respectable, it doesn't look like a respectable person having a page ... It took me a while and I taught myself how to edit Wikipedia. I can't handle being given directions, I can't handle that sort of stuff. I don't have technical skills, though I taught myself over time. But at the time I

Right: The hero of Wiki wacky woo? Susan Gerbic tours the historic heart of Sydney's Rocks.

didn't know how to do it.

I think, that's what makes me a better trainer of people who are like me, not technically-minded. I put it in words that mean something; I say "the little squiggly line". I explain it to people who do not have code skills or have an IT background. I don't have that background so I can explain it easily to somebody.

So I started on Facebook talking about some of the pages I'd been working on and people asked me, What are you working on next?,

and I'd say, I don't know, I was thinking of working on this page. I had a question about something which I posted on Facebook, and one of my

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friends – I had about 300 or 400 at that time, four years ago, which wasn't huge. It was just a loosely associated bunch of people.

And then somebody said that Mark Edwards was going to a skepticamp in Colorado, and I said I want to do a lecture. So I spoke about Wikipedia; totally didn't know what I was talking about.

Then I was asked to do a lecture at a conference in Berkley in California. I fainted during the lecture, which was hilarious. I was sick ... I didn't know how sick I was. I got up in front of the audience of about 50 people, and I went all white. I thought I was going to pass out, I couldn't hear the questions. I didn't know what I was doing; I was just rambling. So I said "Mark Edwards is going to take over for the next ten minutes". I just managed to get off just before I passed out and nearly hit the ground. I threw up a few times in the bathroom. My friends pulled me back and I went back into the room and finished my lecture. I was OK for a few hours, and then I was dead.

I had some kind of bug. I don't get nerves. I had a screwdriver the night before and I think it might have been the orange juice that was off. Not the vodka!

But the lecture room was hot.

I don't get embarrassed easily; I've had some of the most embarrassing things happen to me. I'm sure throwing up in front of 500 people in a lecture was probably the most embarrassing thing that could happen to me, so I don't get embarrassed easily. I mean, I crawl on the floor with babies making silly noises.

I eventually did a TAM presentation. That really forced me to

get a name for a group and a blog going. Then people started joining me. That was in 2011. In 2012 at TAM I thought I'd open it up to other languages beside English. We made an announcement from the stage, and I was mobbed. Most of those didn't stay with the project, because I didn't know anything. I was trying to do training on Facebook. Eventually we moved to a private forum as a private group. No money was involved; it was a community, we know each other.

And that was the start of Guerrilla Skepticism on Wikipedia?

When it first started it was kind of an underground activity, and we weren't quite sure what Wikipedia would think about it, but it's now quite open.

This is a project that needs to be done.

It's my group – we average from 60 to 100 people, with different languages. Some people are dormant, and if I can't contact them after a while I drop them from the list. I cleaned house just before coming to Australia and there's about 70

people on the list.

Once they're trained they can do whatever they like. It's a pretty loose committee.

We have teams, and they can focus on a project or

a page. Even person is working on something that they are interested or enjoy.

Inside each group, you'd see several threads.

We're working on the Lake Champlain monster page right now. So there are people who are just working on that. And right next to them are people working on something else.

As a group we might focus on one topic for six months. That's not one page, but a theme. To write a page like the Launceston Skeptics where everything had been done for me took about six hours. Facilitated communication took about 30-40 hours. Spontaneous human combustion probably took about 15 hours. That

includes research and writing. Of course, it's done over weeks.

The last theme we did was on vaccination. This covered a lot of different aspects. We had pages on Melanie's Marvellous Measles, Stephanie Messenger, Sheri Tenpenny, we had a Jim Carrey page in Spanish. We were able to add sentences to various anti-vax movie stars' pages.

Next I think will be skeptical books. We've got a list of 500, so we'll see if we can get out about 100. Some



of them don't have pages, other pages are really poor and there are a few that are well written.

Perhaps 500 Skeptical Books You Must Read Before You Die?

That would be interesting.

How do you choose the pages you work on?

Whatever inspires me, I attend a lecture, people tell me over and over you've got to work on this page.

Is it the topic that interests you? Is it the quality of the page?

Sometimes I feel sorry for a page. Sometimes I say this is going to be in the media soon, maybe if someone is coming out with a book. Jim Baggott had written about Higgs-Boson and string theory, and had a new book called *Farewell to Reality* on "fairytale physics". So I met him at TAM, a very nice man, and I took a photo of him.

“ This is a notable person, and they should have a page, but this one is crap. So I'll rewrite it.”



Left: Tassie Devil hat and the Coathanger.

Far left: A constant photographer, Susan Gerbic takes a selfie on stage at the Skeptics National Convention in Brisbane.

Sometimes that's the way it happens – I've taken a photo, now I have to have a page to put it on.

The Launceston Skeptics that I finished about 35 minutes ago – Jin-Oh Choi had all the references done, all I had to do was write the page.

If you want my personal attention, you've got to be the squeaky wheel, and you have the citations ready. If I write to you and say I need a photo, and you respond quickly, then you're more likely to get my attention than if I have to chase you.

As for the topics, skepticism and science sort of merge. When Jim Baggott spoke at TAM, I considered him one of our spokespeople on skepticism, but he's actually more science-related.

Nathan Phelps is an atheist who was coming to a QED conference that I was going to speak at. I wanted to have everybody at QED to have had something done for their page. It ended up just by accident that his father, a famous fundamentalist preacher, died - it just so happened that I saw news that he was in a hospice and I thought we have to get this page up straight away.

You say there's very little evidence of stacking of the information on Wikipedia to suit themselves. Except for a few big cases – like Scientologists editing the page on them – it doesn't happen very often.

That Scientology page has now been banned from editing.

There are problems with some

corporations going in and hiring people to write their Wikipedia pages. That's not something that I have anything to do with. [Wikipedia] are trying to deal with that. One of the problems that we are encountering all the time are scientists, professors, people who have created their own Wikipedia pages or they've had a family member or a grad student create it. Most of them are crap. You look at it and you go, this is obviously somebody who knows nothing about how to edit Wikipedia. People are desperate that they want a Wikipedia page and I can tell as an editor that there are tell-tale signs that this is pretty much a page created by somebody just because they wanted to.

We're fine with that, we don't remove the page. But say this is a notable person and they should have a page, but this one is crap. So I'll go in and rewrite it.

You're doing them a favour.

Yes. Well, it's doing the community a favour. I see it like, these people represent us - they're scientists, skeptics - so if their pages look like crap then we look like crap. If they have a better, well-written Wikipedia page, then they're more likely to get hired to do more lectures, to do more outreach to the community. The media are going to look at them and say this person knows what they're talking about of this person has great creds; they can look at past lectures they've done or look at their personality on the page and say, maybe this is somebody we ought to approach to do a TV show or do a lecture series.

We're giving them like a media buzz, like making a promo for them.

When Wikipedia first came out it was a looser thing, so there is a lot of content that hasn't been fixed because people were able to come on and make their own pages. Now there are a lot more controls. So I published the page on Launceston Skeptics page 45 minutes ago ... 50 minutes ago now ... and somebody on Wikipedia would have got a notice that there is a brand new page published and there are maybe several people looking at the page right now to make sure it's accurate and the citations match.

Are these people who have particular knowledge on the topic or who know the process?

On the process of Wikipedia. They might know nothing about scepticism. The people who review the pages might not know about what's on there. But say it could refer to a wrong year. Somebody could fix that, and the info might be reverted. There could be that information, but that's why you go to the citations. Wikipedia is the overview so that you're not reading something blind. A history text could be easily more biased or not factual.

With a gazillion pages on Wikipedia, is the general standard of what's on the page pretty low, or are they getting better?

Depends on who does it. I regularly find studs [short updates to entries] of a paragraph or two - I'm constantly finding that. Some people think it's a great idea to have as many studs as possible. I don't like that idea. I think it's more important to go and do it right the first time, even if it's only a small entry. Some people just go make studs, and I think "can you just do it right?" You can create four studs in the time it takes to make a new entry.

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Students often go to Wikipedia as their first port of call for assignments, and teachers tell them not to use Wikipedia. There's an accusation of a lack of rigour and accuracy. How do you find Wikipedia?

You know, I get this question all the time and I'm totally stunned by it. It's like an old chestnut that's thrown out there. If I was a teacher or a professor I'd say make sure you go to Wikipedia first and get some great citations – you can go to the bottom and use those citations to find more citations. It's not necessarily the page that they're doing. Say it's on some historical topic in Australian history but they get some background on whatever it is they're writing about. Not necessarily the specific topic. What they don't want you to do is quote Wikipedia, because that's plagiarism. Don't just copy and paste from Wikipedia because it's so easy to find out. It's a fantastic source. It's a launching place.

Some history texts or encyclopedia are only updated, say, every twenty or thirty years.

That's right. Who's reviewing that? There's new information all the time. A printed encyclopedia wouldn't be able to react to that, but on Wikipedia you'd have it in minutes.

I've always found the hyperlinks on Wikipedia page useful – you can start reading something, and then move on to something else that is associated with it. I use that for the What Goes Around feature in the magazine.

We want to make sure that when someone goes to a Wikipedia page they will be able to follow all kinds of hyperlinks. People discover all sorts of things they didn't know about

scepticism.

I really like to get pages for people who are not known for their scepticism. William P Davis is one of the first pages I wrote. He's the cigarette smoking man on *X-Files*. (See an interview with Davis, *The Skeptic* Vol 33:1, March 2033.) Then there's Roman Chan, who's a major table tennis player. He was also on the show *Survivor*. By having skeptics stuff on his Wikipedia page, people who go to read about his table tennis expertise or his being on *Survivor* they start going "This guy is really interesting. What's this skepticism stuff?" They'll go link after link and they'll find the skeptical community.

Because you work in some controversial areas, do you ever get hate mail?

I see blogs from people who say that they're unhappy with some of the changes I've made. Usually they blame the Guerrilla Skeptics because of the name. They blame us for things we haven't even touched.

I have a collection of eight or nine blogs, creationists and such, who claim that their pages are off limits now because the Guerrilla Skeptics control it and so they have to move on elsewhere.

The average Wikipedia editor is skeptical, whether they identify that way or not, because the rules of Wikipedia are totally oriented to scientific evidence.

What do you get out of it?

I had stage-two breast cancer. It was all public; I had photos up all over the place with me bald. I think that whenever you go through a life change like that it makes you say to yourself that "I've got to get this together. What if I die tomorrow?" I needed some sort of legacy that people would remember.

I absolutely love training. I love doing something that I think is really important. It's nice to be asked to

speak to people, because I'm really a social person.

I've made Guerrilla Skeptics in such a way that people have the keys to everything. If the plane goes down right now, other people would be able to step in immediately. It would be a different GSoW because it wouldn't

“ The average Wikipedia editor is skeptical, whether they identify that way or not.”

be me running it. I'm really trying to build my people into the next activists. I have no idea what they're going to do next. The people who work for me are amazing people. I have people who are just moving on, but I feel that I've given them the instructions, I've helped them make contact with other people, so in a way I'm teaching them to network.

One of my editors just announced today that she's writing a book on facilitated communication because she's an expert on it - she was a facilitated communicator for many years. I have another editor in Brazil who is going to be an admin for Brazilian Wikipedia, which is a huge step. I have another editor in Darwin who said, finally, they're going to restart a skeptics group there. I have editors in the Netherlands and in Hungary who are now involved with the European Council of Skeptical Organisations. So through GSoW we are able to sponsor other people. Like Richard Saunders' video on vaccination – I was able to pull in other people to get that translated into other languages, with captions in Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish and others.

We can help to improve the community. We're a hub ... and if I can be the centre of the hub, I'm happy. I'm super happy. ■



About the interviewer:
Tim Mendham is executive officer and editor with Australian Skeptics Inc.