# Wikipedia is pushing the boundaries of scholarly practice but the gender gap must be addressed

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/04/09/change-the-world-edit-wikipedia/

Wikipedia is virtually uncontested as an instrumental conduit for global knowledge exchange. But who is creating and maintaining this knowledge and does it adequately reflect the diversity of expertise and discourse? Adrianne Wadewitz explores the gender gap in Wikipedia editors and argues that since approximately 90% of editors are male, every edit is inherently political and subject to problems of bias. If feminists and academics want the rules of Wikipedia to evolve in ways that reflect their expertise, they must participate in the conversation.
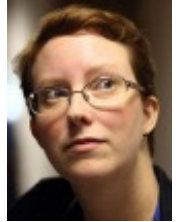
Wikipedia is the largest reference work the world has ever created. It is the sixth-largest website in the world. It is the most visited reference work on the internet. It is available in over 285 languages. If you want to affect how the world understands a particular topic, you must edit Wikipedia.

As academics, we already possess many of the skills necessary to be excellent writers of encyclopedia entries: specialized knowledge and finely-honed research and writing abilities. It is incumbent upon us to share our knowledge with the world, where it will be read not only by our fellow academics but by anyone curious about our topics.

The gender gap: every edit is political

Wikipedia bills itself as "the free encyclopedia and anyone can edit" – but not everyone does. Approximately 90% of Wikipedia's editors are male. For Wikipedia, this has resulted in problems of bias, overrepresentation/underrepresentation of topics, and an environment hostile towards female editors. A lack of diversity amongst editors means that, for example, topics typically associated with femininity are underrepresented and often actively deleted. In one publicly reported example, an article about Kate Middleton's wedding dress was deleted. This is part of a larger trend. WikiProjects, which organize Wikipedia's content around topics to mobilize its editors, show the level of interest in a topic. The most organized and successful WikiProject is Military History while projects like Textile Arts languish. In many ways, Wikipedia suffers from the same exclusionary problems of the Encyclopédie of old.

Every edit on Wikipedia is political. While Wikipedians pride themselves on remaining objective and neutral, it is impossible to remain so and the presentation of contemporary events puts this into high relief. In February 2012, Sandra Fluke testified before Congressional Democrats about women's reproductive rights, for which she was viciously attacked by Rush Limbaugh. Within four days of her testimony, a Wikipedia article was created for her. This is one of Wikipedia's strengths – its ability to be up-to-date. However, within five minutes of being created, the article was nominated for "speedy deletion" for "no indication of importance" (this process allows Wikipedians to delete obvious spam articles). It remained an article, passing this test, but was nominated two hours later through a more rigorous deletion process, in which Wikipedians would debate the merits of the article for a week. Fluke was considered non-notable or notable only because Rush Limbaugh had attacked her. In the end, her biographical article was merged with the Rush Limbaugh-Sandra Fluke controversy article. For three and a half months on Google, the first Google hit for Sandra Fluke's name was Wikipedia's article on the controversy. At that time, the Sandra Fluke article was recreated and she was deemed notable enough to have her own article.

Google   sandra fluke

Search   About 74,700,000 results (0.23 seconds)

Everything

Images

Maps

Rush Limbaugh – **Sandra Fluke** controversy - Wikipedia, the free …
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rush_Limbaugh_–_Sandra_Fluke_controversy
The Rush Limbaugh – **Sandra Fluke** controversy began on February 29, 2012, when,
over three days, American conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh …

Wikipedia's rules are not neutral or objective, however much Wikipedians may wish them to be – they have very real political consequences. For three and a half months, Wikipedia allowed Sandra Fluke to be defined by Rush Limbaugh's wildly inappropriate and derogatory comments, rather than by her own life story, and helped fuel an irrelevant news story. This is one small example of how every choice Wikipedia editors make on the encyclopedia shapes the world's knowledge and thus who is editing the encyclopedia is of paramount importance.

The gender gap and its concomitant effect on the content and structure of the encyclopedia has caused a recent upsurge in efforts to recruit more women to edit Wikipedia. The Wikimedia Foundation, for example, hired a fellow specifically to work on this problem for a year. But there have also been grassroots efforts and the #tooFEW edit-a-thon on March 15 was part of this. During this event, the THATCamp Feminisms West, East, and South hosted edit-a-thons. Moreover, as news of the edit-a-thon spread, other locations (mainly in the United States) started their own editing sessions and individuals made time in their day to add to Wikipedia's coverage of women.

The root of all knowledge

During the edit-a-thon, the question of notability and verifiability was raised frequently. Wikipedia has a "notability" policy that determines who and what can have an article. While Wikipedia includes articles about many more topics than a traditional encyclopedia, it does not include articles about any topic. Over the years, Wikipedia's notability guideline has evolved quite a bit. Wikipedia did not have a solid notability guide until 2007. This is important to remember – Wikipedia's policies, like everything on the site, evolves and changes as the community changes (if you want to follow the changes, click on the "view history" tab at the top of the page). In general, a topic is notable if it has been covered in reliable sources independent of the subject. What this means in practice, of course, is that Wikipedia should be fundamentally conservative in the sense that it is only publishing information that has been published before. However, because Wikipedia accepts a variety of reliable sources (while still privileging peer-reviewed sources), such as newspapers and blog posts, there are ways in which the encyclopedia is pushing against the boundaries of established scholarly practice.

While academics may see Wikipedia's rules as restrictive and prescriptive (and in certain contexts they certainly can be), Wikipedians themselves are constantly working to adjust the rules. For example, at Wikimania 2012 (the conference for all things Wikipedia), there was a panel on "Wikipedia in the Twitter Age", which specifically raised the question of the reliability of different kinds of information and which forms Wikipedia privileges and why, using the 2011 Egyptian revolution as an example of when the most reliable information came from Twitter.

There is nothing more essential than seeing that these policies on Wikipedia are evolving and that if we as feminists and academics want them to evolve in ways we feel reflect the progressive politics important to us, we must participate in the conversation. Wikipedia is a community and we have to join it.

Join us!

Those of participating in the #tooFEW edit-a-thon ended the afternoon by discussing how one could be a feminist activist on Wikipedia. Our ideas included everything from adding content on women to reviewing articles other Wikipedians have written to helping shape guidelines for WikiProjects to using Wikipedia in the classroom.

- The Global Women Wikipedia Write-In – This event on April 26 will focus on adding information to Wikipedia about women from around the world, not just from the Europe and the US.
- FemWikiBot – An experiment in thinking about how bots work on Wikipedia and what a feminist bot might look like
- Edits and thoughts in the twitterverse
- Introduction to editing Wikipedia

What Wikipedia chooses to include is shaping what we remember and value about our culture. It is important that as academics we do not absent ourselves from these debates. Wikipedia, like the Encyclopédie, will define what knowledge is for generations. Join us in shaping the world's knowledge!

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

Adrianne Wadewitz *is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Digital Learning and Research at Occidental College specializing in 18th-century children's literature and the digital humanities. She received her PhD from Indiana University in 2011 and her most recent publication is a series of blog posts in ProfHacker about being a postdoc at a liberal arts college: "A Day in the Life of a Digital Humanities Postdoc ", "Digital Scholarship in the Liberal Arts Tradition", and "Making Digital Collaboration Visible".*