

Zachary J. McDowell and Matthew A. Vetter

Wikipedia and the representation of reality

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Introduction

People often assume that academics write Wikipedia, or that Wikipedia has professional writers. Despite an awareness that “anyone could edit Wikipedia,” many of us rarely think about how it came together. Despite using it constantly we recall being told “not to use it” because it is it was so unreliable.

Our interactions with other teachers and academics at conferences and elsewhere have furthered this understanding. Many of the myths and misunderstandings of Wikipedia persist among academics, even those who study education, writing, digital culture, and other relevant fields. It seems that everyone uses Wikipedia despite being told not to, and no one knows how it works

Hundreds of comparative studies have favorably compared Wikipedia’s accuracy to “traditional” encyclopedias. In addition, the encyclopedia has been recognized as an essential resource for accurate public health information related to COVID-19. Indeed, as early as 2007, Wikipedia was acknowledged as a reliable and rapid-response resource for information related to crisis events.

One of the earliest studies, first published in *Nature* in 2005, ascertained that Wikipedia was nearly as accurate as its (former) print contender Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Since then, numerous studies on subjects as diverse as medicine, crisis response, and as recent as the COVID-19 pandemic, have further solidified Wikipedia’s currency and accuracy.

In one study related to medicine and pharmacology, researchers analyzed the accuracy and completeness of drug information in the German and English language versions of Wikipedia in comparison to standard textbooks of pharmacology. According to this research, the accuracy of pharmacological content in English and German language Wikipedias was in the range between 99.6% and 100%...with an overall mean score of 99.7%

One of the earliest guidelines in Wikipedia is “Be Bold” (WP:BOLD)

It is frequently invoked in training and other initiatives to familiarize the public with the encyclopedia. “Be Bold,” asks potential editors to “Go for it.” “Wikis like ours,” the article further explains, “develop when everybody helps to fix problems, correct grammar, add facts, make sure wording is accurate, etc.” For the encyclopedia to grow and improve, editors should be active in correcting issues or errors they notice.

Additionally, the guideline warns, “Do not be upset if your bold edit gets reverted.” Editors should “Assume Good Faith” (the good intentions of other editors) if and when their bold edits are removed.

One of our students likened the boldness directive to being “thrown in a pool without the ability to swim,” while another noted that they “ultimately felt more anxiety than boldness.” Students often felt like they were stepping on others’ toes, and were afraid to upset the author of the original words. Feeling empathy for the original author’s work, they realized that they too might feel upset by their words changed.

The past ten years have seen tremendous growth in the adoption of Wikipedia-based educational activities in higher education, in large part due to the consistent efforts of the Wiki Education Foundation. Many of the instructors engaging Wikipedia-based pedagogies are doing so out of a desire to improve **Wikipedia’s content gaps**, often centered around the gender gap or representation of other **marginalized voices**.

This emphasis on improving marginalized content in the encyclopedia often leads new editors (students, teachers, and novices, in general) to confront a specific problem related to notability. Articles may be less developed (or non-existent) because there are not enough verifiable secondary sources for Wikipedia editors to draw from. Lack of coverage of a topic in Wikipedia, in this way, often reflects societal marginalization.

When there is little to no secondary coverage of a subject outside of Wikipedia, there’s little to draw from to create or add to a parallel article in the encyclopedia.

Wikipedia is a tertiary source and relies upon secondary sources to back up its claims, Wikipedia must link to or reference each and every statement made on Wikipedia. This presents (at least) two major problems.

The first is simply that access is unequal across different users, as many important sources of secondary information (particularly academic journals but also many newspapers) lie behind often cost-prohibitive paywalls.

Second, this can create serious problems for accessing the “grist” for Wikipedia if it is not also open access. If each statement must be verifiable, it should be verifiable by “every single person on the planet” if Wikipedia is to be truly “open access” – or else how can Wikipedia ensure that the information is verifiably correct?

Notability

How Wikipedia decides what counts as “knowledge” through **notability** teaches students about systemic biases and about the exclusion of marginalized voices. Often students wish to work on topics and people that are of interest to them, yet not enough has been published to meet the

requirements of notability, which all but ensures that they need to pick another topic or face deletion.

The immense bureaucracy of the English language version of W. has shown us that it is nearly impossible for anyone editor to be completely versed in the numerous policies, guidelines, and unspoken norms that inform editing and interaction.

Contributors not only struggle with **sourcing** and **notability** but also with writing neutrality, with organizing their pages properly, and with proper Wiki-style.

Despite there being “no firm rules” Wikipedia’s policies and guidelines seem nearly limitless to novices, and even to many established Wikipedians. Beyond the tasks of understanding **Reliability, Verifiability, Neutrality, and Notability**, there are scores of policies and guidelines that govern every detail, and often in slightly contradictory and vague.

Over the years, one of our favorite videos to show students is an Ignite talk from 2010 entitled “Why Wikipedians are the Weirdest people on the Internet” by Steven Walling, where he notes that “no one knows what the hell we’re saying as we speak a secret jargon filled with over twelve thousand acronyms. No Wikipedian knows them all but we know enough to confuse the hell out of you.”

The barrier to participation is incredibly high for newcomers due to the complexity. Furthermore, those who are able to participate in these conversations on Wikipedia utilize language and knowledge that, intentionally or not, restrict access for those not fluent in “secret jargon.”

Some editors have taken it upon themselves to actively lambaste new users’ work, or even worse, simply delete it before it has a chance to improve.

As of October 2020, there are 55,003,717 articles across more than 270 language versions.

The English Wikipedia alone makes up 11% of that total article count, with 6,180,910 articles containing over 3.7 billion words. The English Wikipedia averages over 9 billion page views per month, from over 800 million unique devices. Wikipedia is currently the 13th most visited website globally, and in the US, the 8th most visited.

Only a third of those page views originate in the US, demonstrating the global reach of the English version.

Wikipedia is both an archive and collection of the world’s information and history, but also incredibly current and timely. In October 2020 a few of the top-viewed articles included “Shooting of Breonna Taylor,” “Joe Biden,” as well as entertainment articles on subjects such as

“Tenet (film),” “Mulan (2020 film),” and “Cobra Kai.” Beyond just archiving history, Wikipedia helps us to understand what the world is thinking about, reading about, and writing about.

Wikipedia is the global reference of dynamic knowledge. As the most influential encyclopedia, Wikipedia plays an important role in **shaping and arbitrating public knowledge**, as well as our epistemological reality (discussed further in this chapter). As we recognize this, however, it’s also important to keep in mind that Wikipedia, **despite the ways in which it challenges traditional notions of authorship** and authority, is part of a long encyclopedic tradition.

FIRST PILLAR: Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia.
From Greek enkyklios paideia, a “circle of learning.”

the encyclopedic genre begins to emerge more clearly in Western cultures in and around the Enlightenment period with

- Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* (seventeenth century),
- Denis Diderot and Jean d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* (eighteenth century),
- and *Encyclopædia Britannica* (nineteenth century).

Achieving (or even attempting) the lofty goal of collecting all the knowledge in the world remains incredibly complicated and raises questions around

- access to knowledge,
- whose knowledge is included,
- who contributes,
- what counts as knowledge.

Wikipedia shapes reality through its representations of the known world!

SECOND PILLAR: Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view

Wikipedia’s capacity to shape reality stems in part from its insistence on neutrality in the representation of facts. The encyclopedia’s second pillar states that, “Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view.” Wikipedians value and “strive for articles in an impartial tone that document and explain major points of view, giving due weight for their prominence.”

When a subject is contested, Wikipedians “describe multiple points of view, presenting each accurately and in context rather than as ‘the truth’ or ‘the best view.’”

Articles should work toward “verifiable accuracy, citing reliable, authoritative sources.”

The guideline for “Reliable sources” notes that “Wikipedia articles should be based on reliable, published sources, making sure that all majority and significant minority views that have appeared in those sources are covered” and, as is typical with Wikipedia, they summarize this succinctly: “If no reliable sources can be found on a topic, Wikipedia should not have an article on it.” Finally, “editors’ personal experiences, interpretations, or opinions do not belong on Wikipedia.”

Stemming from this second pillar is one of the most fundamental (and earliest) of Wikipedia's major policies: "Neutral Point of View" (WP:NPOV).

Wikipedia's policy article on NPOV lists the following "principles" to ensure that editors "achieve the level of neutrality that is appropriate for the encyclopedia":

- Avoid stating opinions as facts.
- Avoid stating seriously contested assertions as facts.
- Avoid stating facts as opinions.
- Prefer nonjudgmental language.
- Indicate the relative prominence of opposing views.

This policy ensures a lack of opinion-based writing, enforces neutral language and tone, as well as seeks to represent knowledge in a balanced manner according to reputable sources.

To be neutral is to describe debates rather than engage in them.

Beyond NPOV, Wikipedia's definition of what constitutes a "fact" relies solely on the policy of Verifiability (WP:V),

Wikipedia not only defines what a fact is (as a verifiable thing that someone has said or published) but also relies on such facts in order to represent and distribute information about our world.

Wikipedia policy does not state or imply that every minority view or extraordinary claim needs to be presented along with commonly accepted mainstream scholarship as if they were of equal validity. This policy helps to combat the "all sides are valid" claim.

The policy of undue weight (WP:UNDUE) warns that "articles should not give minority views or aspects as much of or as detailed a description as more widely held views or widely supported aspects."

Articles must be based on reliable, independent, published sources with a reputation for fact-checking and accuracy, particularly naming well-known journalistic and academic sources as the most ideal sources for **verifiability**. The policy of **Verifiability** includes robust guidelines on the trustworthiness of information and how to make decisions about it.

The "Citation needed" tag has become so common in Wikipedia that it has also entered into public discourse.

Problem: The emphasis on verifiable print sources plays a significant role in the marginalization of indigenous knowledge cultures, especially when their knowledge is stored and transmitted orally.

THIRD PILLAR: Wikipedia is free content.

The first set of Creative Commons licenses were published in 2002.

The founding of Wikipedia and Creative Commons within roughly the same time period points to a larger movement occurring in internet culture – what might be considered a high water mark of the Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) movement. As opposed to proprietary programs or stems, FLOSS (or FOSS) is open-source software that anyone is freely licensed to use, copy, study, and change. Among early scholars to theorize Wikipedia's mode of information production, Yochai Benkler recognized Wikipedia as FLOSS due to its radically collaborative methods.

The term "Wiki" was introduced by Ward Cunningham in 1995 with Wiki-WikiWeb (WikiWiki means "fast" or "hurry" in Hawaiian). Wikis allow anyone to contribute in a distributed manner and harness the link-ability of Internet pages.

We see Wikipedia's success as at least partially due to the (techno)optimistic rhetoric that accompanied it. Like most (techno)optimism of the early 2000s, however, Wikipedia's rhetoric was overly ambitious and somewhat naive. The encyclopedia that "anyone can edit," as it turns out, is mostly edited by male contributors. As Heather Ford and Judy Wajcman write: "While exact numbers are difficult to estimate, no one disputes that the overwhelming majority of contributors are male."

On October 2, 2018, Donna Strickland became the third woman ever to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics. She was the first woman to achieve this distinction in 55 years. Despite Strickland's accomplished scientific career leading up to this momentous occasion, until the day of the award, she did not have a page on Wikipedia. The initial page for Strickland was written more than four years prior, on March 7, 2014, only to be nominated for speedy deletion (and deleted) that very day. It took a Nobel prize for her page to be deemed "notable" enough for inclusion. This event struck a nerve amongst many that have been concerned about the way Wikipedia decides what to include in the encyclopedia.

Strickland was not the first, nor will she be the last, person excluded from the encyclopedia due to the Notability" (or WP:N) guideline. In its very basic sense, notability is a "test used by editors to determine whether a given topic warrants its own article." The test is to understand whether the topic (or person) has "received significant coverage in reliable sources," but much like everything else on Wikipedia, it remains incredibly complicated in how it is employed.

Donna Strickland's story of exclusion on Wikipedia received significant press coverage, and numerous sources called out Wikipedia for its perceived exclusionary practices in regard to notability of Strickland and other female scientists. The Executive Director of the Wikimedia Foundation, Katherine Maher, responded to the controversy, acknowledging the issue along with pointing out the larger issues included, stating that "[Wikipedia is] a mirror of the world's biases, not the source of them."

WikiProject Women in Red (WiR), a reference to how red links on Wikipedia signify a missing page (as opposed to blue which link to an existing page), was founded in July 2015 to increase the representation of women on Wikipedia. According to WiR “in October 2014, only 15.53% of English Wikipedia’s biographies were about women,” but with the help of WiR and others concerned about this gender and content gap, that percentage has increased to 18.64% as of 20 November 2020.

FOURTH PILLAR: Wikipedia is a community

The fourth pillar, “Wikipedia’s editors should treat each other with respect and civility” reveals something fundamental about Wikipedia that many do not consider when thinking about Wikipedia: Wikipedia is a community.

At a fundamental level, the fourth pillar asks editors to be nice to each other, but it is a rather vague statement with lofty intentions. The guideline “Please don’t bite the newcomers” (WP:BITE) is related to the 4th pillar.

FIFTH PILLAR: Wikipedia does not have firm rules

Each policy and guideline has the ability to change and evolve (and has) over time. Despite there being “no firm rules,” Wikipedia has hundreds of guidelines and policies ...

No Rules, But Lots of Hierarchy!

Wikipedia employs a fairly robust hierarchy of rules and protections, many which remain imperative to combating misinformation. Many tasks, including creating new pages or even editing privileges on some pages (particularly controversial ones or of famous people especially) are “protected” from editors without advanced permissions.

Wikipedia, much like many online communities, utilizes a system of user access levels to manage these permissions. User access levels define editors’ permissions or abilities to perform specific actions on Wikipedia. While any user, regardless of being logged into a registered account, can view and edit many articles, additional specialized permissions become available to registered users, particularly articles with a long history of fame or controversy.

Wikipedia has **six levels** of user access levels, four of which are automatically assigned utilizing participation levels and time, while two are conferred upon users through community consensus.

- Unregistered users may edit pages that are not protected. Like all edits, edits are recorded in history pages, but are listed by the IP address.
- Registered (new) users may make edits to pages that are not protected or semi-protected, but they cannot create, move, or rename pages. This user group is also restricted from uploading images or other files. Newly registered users can edit preferences, create a user page, and their history of contributions is recorded in

association with their username, which allows them to build up time and edit history to become autoconfirmed and confirmed users.

- Newly registered users whose accounts are “at least 4 days old and who have made at least 10 edits” automatically are added to the group. These users can create new Wikipedia articles, move pages, edit semi-protected pages, and upload files. As of February 2019, there were 1.7 million confirmed users “of which the vast majority were inactive.”
- Editors can additionally become “extended confirmed” when their account is at least 30 days old and they have made at least 500 edits. These users can edit pages locked “under extended confirmed protection” – a more secure level of protection. As of October 2020, there are 52,988 users identified as “extended confirmed.”

These access levels are all usually conferred automatically (or if an administrator “confirms” the user manually).

The two highest user access levels conferred on Wikipedia are approved through community consensus

- Administrators can access tools and abilities such as “page deletion, page protection, blocking and unblocking users, and the ability to edit full protected pages,” as well as “grant and remove most access rights to other users.”
- Bureaucrats can also grant and remove administrator access

All of these roles, even the administration and bureaucrat roles, are volunteer only.

Wikipedia as Cultural Hegemony

To understand the importance of why Wikipedia is so pivotal, and how its policies, guidelines, and community influence (through the encyclopedia) how knowledge (and therefore reality itself) is represented, it is imperative to understand how information representation can influence culture and ideology.

Antonio Gramsci calls “cultural hegemony” the beliefs and powers that control the norms of society. The guidelines and policies of Wikipedia and how they are put into practice are ideological in nature, as they govern how information can be represented. Furthermore, participating in Wikipedia, whether actively editing or reading, acts as participation in this hegemonic power. Users actively consent to this representation, this ideology, without knowing how it forms understandings of how information is represented.

As the encyclopedia, Wikipedia shapes how we access knowledge and what knowledge we have access to, and that remains imperative to understanding our present and future

As we excavate Wikipedia’s often unspoken archaeology, we also attend to how the encyclopedia has developed a certain culture that originated in (1) a very homogenous

demographic of highly educated, white, and male participants, at a time when (2) the early web promised an overly optimistic, and even emancipatory, democratization of knowledge and participation.

What Wikipedia is not

Style and format

1.1 Wikipedia is not a paper encyclopedia

Encyclopedic content

2.1 Wikipedia is not a dictionary

2.2 Wikipedia is not a publisher of original thought

2.3 Wikipedia is not a soapbox or means of promotion

2.4 Wikipedia is not a mirror or a repository of links, images, or media files

2.5 Wikipedia is not a blog, web hosting service, social networking service, or memorial site

2.6 Wikipedia is not a directory

2.7 Wikipedia is not a manual, guidebook, textbook, or scientific journal

2.8 Wikipedia is not a crystal ball

2.9 Wikipedia is not a newspaper

2.10 Wikipedia is not an indiscriminate collection of information

2.11 Wikipedia is not censored

Community

3.1 Wikipedia is not anarchy or a forum for free speech

3.2 Wikipedia is not a democracy

3.3 Wikipedia is not a bureaucracy

3.4 Wikipedia is not a laboratory

3.5 Wikipedia is not a battleground (to carry on ideological battles, or nurture prejudice, hatred, or fear)

3.6 Wikipedia is not compulsory

Editors

The average editor of Wikipedia is not at all representative of the world's population by any stretch of the imagination. Although a fairly narrow demographic to represent "the sum of all human knowledge," understanding the population and motivations of Wikipedians helps to bring context to the volunteer group populating this massive knowledge base.

These volunteers, who might have started off writing about South Park, Pokemon, or World War II Battleships, are the base population that then can potentially be promoted to administrative positions within the volunteer community.

Editors, whether they admit it or not, may carry editorial biases to administrative positions, and those who "stuck around long enough" then go on to make larger decisions about inclusion of information within Wikipedia.

Despite being told not to "bite the newcomers," the editors on Wikipedia often bite, particularly those who are "thrown in" and are already struggling with trying to swim.

The initial excitement of writing for a global online platform can dissipate quickly when newcomers receive their first snarky message from another editor or after their work is flagged, marked for deletion, or even worse, deleted altogether.

Racially charged, misogynistic, transphobic, homophobic, and other identity-based types of harassment are common in the Wikimedia community. While the research conducted by Wikimedia examined forms of harassment experienced by all members of the Wikimedia community, research on Wikipedia's gender gap and the ways in which this gap has emerged and persists.

A recent interview-based study of 25 women editors in Wikipedia suggested that for women attempting to navigate the encyclopedia's community, Wikipedia represents "a spectrum of safe and unsafe spaces" – with multiple types of harassment, stalking, and other issues reported frequently by participants.

What is helpful here to take from this is that when we speak of Wikipedia, and particularly the community of Wikipedia, it is a vast space with numerous projects, roles, and differing pieces that work both separately but also influence each other – there is no separating the "toxic" aspects and elements as each of the spaces infect each other.

A few examples of more actively inclusive practices are groups like Black Lunch Table and AfroCrowd, both which center black voices to discuss matters about Wikipedia (and elsewhere) and target inclusion of black voices as well as seeking to diversify content on black artists.

The Wiki Education Foundation recruits teachers to bring Wikipedia projects into the classroom. Wiki Education is a prime example of active inclusion as it helps to diversify editors through educators that bring Wikipedia assignments into the classroom.

Emerging from the "Wikimedia 2030" discussions at Wikimania in Montreal 2017, and continued throughout the following years in numerous spaces, the community and the Wikimedia foundation outlined and drafted what is now known as the "Universal Code of Conduct" (UCoC).