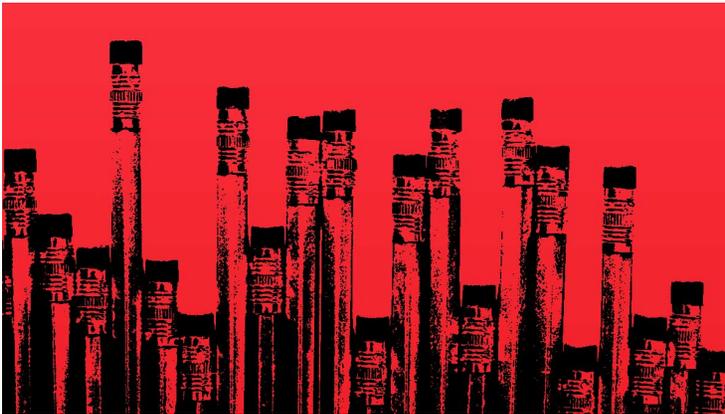


Why Do So Few Women Edit Wikipedia?

by Nicole Torres

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In 2008, a survey found that less than 13% of Wikipedia contributors worldwide were women. The free online encyclopedia that “anyone can edit” was outed as being mostly run by men. A follow up survey in 2011 found similar results: globally, 9% of contributors were women; in the U.S., it was 15%. Meanwhile, there appeared to be no significant gender difference in readership rates.

These findings sparked profuse debate over what was discouraging women from contributing — yet there hasn’t been much of a change since then. Last year, Jimmy Wales, the founder of the Wikimedia Foundation, which runs the site, said that the organization failed to meet its goal of increasing women’s participation to 25% by 2015, despite launching several initiatives.

This is as much of a business issue for Wikipedia as it is a societal one for the information age. Even though it is the 7th most visited website in the world and averages more than 18 billion page views per month, the number of editors for the English-language site has been shrinking. Wikipedia’s future may depend on its ability to recruit more editors from the other half of the population.

Why do so few women edit Wikipedia articles?

Two professors, Julia Bear of Stony Brook University’s College of Business and Benjamin Collier of Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, decided to explore the issue from the perspective of women who had been behind the scenes. They analyzed a subset of the original 2008 survey data to see whether the experience of editing articles differs for women and men, and whether this influences how much they edit. They found clear differences. Women reported feeling less confident about their expertise, less comfortable with editing others’ work (a process which often involves conflict), and reacting more negatively to critical feedback than men. The results were published in the journal *Sex Roles* in January.

Bear and Collier’s sample spanned 1,589 occasional U.S. contributors (17.5% were female) who reported editing infrequently and *not* wanting to be more active. The original global survey from which this subset was drawn had a total of 176,192 respondents and was conducted by the Wikimedia Foundation and UNU-MERIT researchers. (It’s worth noting that while opt-in surveys have their limitations, such as a response bias, they’re arguably the best source of data on this problem.)

The researchers examined how much participants agreed with the following measures: “I don’t think I have enough knowledge or expertise to contribute,” “I don’t feel comfortable editing other people’s work,” “I am afraid for making a mistake and being criticized,” and “I don’t have time.” They also saw the number of articles respondents said they had edited. They controlled for age, years of education, whether people were in a relationship, and whether they had children.

A fair amount of research has already shown that men and women differ when it comes to confidence and comfort with negative feedback and conflict. For example, it’s well known that women report less confidence than men across a variety of tasks — even though they don’t actually score lower on ability and expertise. And while some studies show that women can be under-confident, others find that men are more likely to be overconfident.

Research also suggests that critical feedback can have a stronger effect on women’s self-esteem than men’s—for instance, women’s self-esteem tends to increase after positive feedback and decrease after negative feedback, whereas men’s doesn’t change much either way.

Then there are gender differences in conflict styles. Bear’s prior research has shown that in general, women are more likely than men to avoid conflict and negotiating. But, as Bear and Collier write in their paper, when women do get caught up in conflict, they tend to feel greater levels of emotional exhaustion, anxiety, cardiovascular reactivity, and negative immune response than men. Moreover, when women express anger, they tend to be penalized more than men would be; when they assert themselves, they face more backlash; and they tend to be judged more harshly for their mistakes.

Because contributing to Wikipedia often means deleting or changing another editor’s work, conflict is prevalent. It’s not just like proofreading. “Editing wars,” heated arguments among users,

and harassment and trolling all coalesce to create a hostile environment that’s especially uninviting for women.

And yet while Bear and Collier’s analysis showed that women reported less confidence in their expertise, greater discomfort with editing, and greater negative response to criticism, their analysis also found that it was the first two (less confidence and greater discomfort) and not the last (negative response to criticism) that was affecting their contributing behavior. Of course, these findings pertain to people who had edited Wikipedia articles; they don’t necessarily generalize to the broader gender gap in editors. But the researchers wrote that they can help us understand it.

“To a certain extent it takes a baseline level of confidence to start editing, and men and women may be setting different bars for the expertise required to do that,” Bear told me. “That’s one of the reasons that we recommend Wikipedia be more proactive about finding and encouraging contributors, as opposed to depending on an individual’s decision that he or she is the expert in this area and should contribute.”

Along with recruiting contributors, Bear and Collier also suggested implementing a system to assess contributors’ actual expertise, deliver positive feedback, and provide training to increase female participation.

... And why it matters

“The gender gap issue matters for several reasons. From a pure content perspective, men and women may bring different interests and preferences, and they may focus on different issues,” Bear said. “If we have such a small percentage of women contributing, then there are a lot of issues that will potentially be skewed or get less attention than they should.”

Research suggests that this skewing happens. When Joseph Reagle, an assistant professor at Northeastern University and author of *Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia*, and

his colleague compared biographies from the English-language Wikipedia and the online Encyclopaedia Britannica, they found that Wikipedia dominates Britannica in biographical coverage (largely due to the fact that it's just much bigger), but more so when it comes to men. Britannica is more balanced in whom it neglects to cover. And others have found biases in the representation of female scientists and novelists on the site.

“Wikipedia is a representation of knowledge. If you go there, and you don't see any female representation or role models, it shows an implicit bias in the way things are ordered and prioritized,” Reagle said. “That can have a significant effect on people.”

Enlisting more women to contribute is the only way to keep women's interests and needs from becoming afterthoughts. Many tech companies are starting to take this seriously, and the issue has not been lost on the Wikimedia Foundation. Over the years, it has been working on shrinking the gender gap among contributors and making the editing process less aggressive. It created a Gender Gap Task Force, built in ways for editors to express gratitude and give positive feedback on the site, organized in-person edit-a-thons, and launched initiatives like the Teahouse, which trained new editors, and the Inspire Campaign, which awarded grants to 16 projects trying to improve gender diversity and representation on the Wikimedia sites.

Recognizing the problem of online harassment on its sites, the Foundation is also focusing more on reducing it. One project, for example, is exploring the use of automated tools to help administrators detect and mediate conflicts earlier. A third Inspire Campaign, this time targeting harassment, is also planned to launch in June, according to Maggie Dennis, interim director of the Community Engagement department at Wikimedia. Mentorship programs and training volunteer leaders to manage issues as they happen have also been slated.

“We learned that improving gender diversity is a complex issue, one that requires a multi-faceted approach. There is no one-size-fits-all method,” Dennis wrote to me via email. “We're aiming to better understand the policies, culture, guidelines and other factors that contribute to a safe, welcoming online environment and how we might better support and facilitate a safe, friendly editing space on Wikipedia.”

There are a number of other ways to make Wikipedia a better place for contributors (and for readers) — from narrowing the Internet skills gap among men and women to bringing in more diverse voices from around the world. Of course, changing a deep-seated culture is never easy, but paying attention to what drives people away is one place to start.

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