



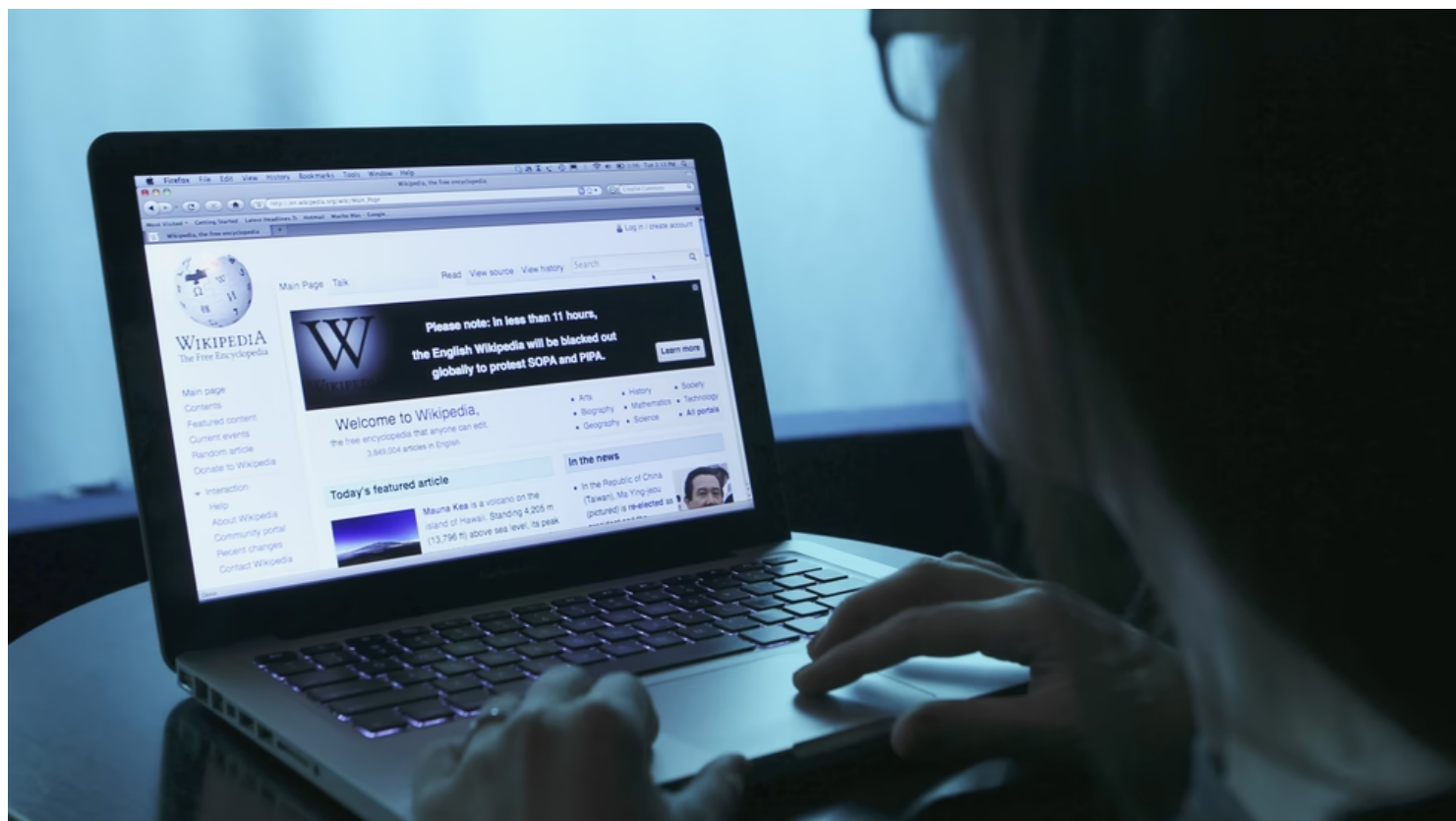
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TECHNOLOGY

# Wikipedia's Hostility to Women

Some female editors have been the target of harassment from their male colleagues—and the gender bias has spilled over into the site's content, too.

By Emma Paling



Gary Cameron / Reuters

OCTOBER 21, 2015

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*Editor's note: This article has been significantly revised post-publication to correct for factual errors in the original version.\**

She got into the habit of Googling her username, just in case. That's how, earlier this year, a Wikipedia editor who goes by the username Lightbreather discovered that someone was posting images on a pornographic website and falsely claiming they were her. (The images were linked to her username; Lightbreather has been careful to make sure that no one on Wikipedia knows her real name.) A Google search of the poster's username led her back to one of her fellow editors.

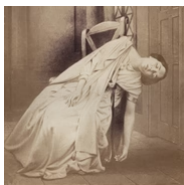
The photos were only the latest of several incidents of harassment. In 2014, Lightbreather made a request to the Wikipedia administrators: a space on the site to discuss ways to enforce Wikipedia's civility policy, one of the site's "five pillars" which

says editors should always “treat each other with respect and civility.” In a page set up to discuss Lightbreather’s request, the user Eric Corbett, who has at times been blocked from editing the site, told her, “The easiest way to avoid being called a cunt is not to act like one.”\*\*

Soon after, Lightbreather was invited to join the Gender Gap Task Force, a project by Wikipedia editors to examine why so few women participate on the site and why there’s a lack of coverage of notable women. A few days after she joined, she says, a male editor who had expressed support for Corbett’s comments against Lightbreather began popping up on the task force’s discussion page—and others soon followed. The male editors would “show up [in online discussions] and say stuff like, ‘Well, show us evidence that there is a gender gap,’” Lightbreather said, even though Wikipedia’s article on its own gender gap states that between 84 and 91 percent of editors are male, and that the imbalance “contributes to the systemic bias in Wikipedia.” She quit the task force a few days later.

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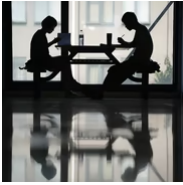
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Then, in January 2015, Lightbreather proposed a women-only space on Wikipedia for female editors to support each other and discuss the specific barriers they face online. The proposal was part of the Wikimedia Foundation's [Inspire Campaign](#), launched to fund projects aimed at closing the site's gender gap—but users took to the “[oppose](#)” section of proposal's discussion page to promise to “fight this to the death.”

“It's just incredible how much hatred was spewing out of these guys. ... When you have a bunch of angry people show up on the doorstep of a new project you're trying to get off the ground, it drives away a lot of people who might have been interested,” Lightbreather said. Her idea for a Women's Wiki didn't get funding from the Foundation, but [others have created similar spaces](#) elsewhere on the site.

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“When white men have been editing history since day one, they don't see this as a problem.”

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After stumbling across the fake pornographic pictures this spring, Lightbreather went to Wikipedia's Arbitration Committee, or ArbCom, a panel of 15 elected users who have the final say on all arguments between editors.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> ArbCom declined to take on Lightbreather's case on the grounds that it may “out” the editor that had posted the

pictures, or link his username to his real name. But by that time, someone had already opened a case against her, a female editor who often defended Corbett in disputes. She argued that Lightbreather approached Wikipedia with a “battleground mentality,” and that because Lightbreather had filed complaints against multiple editors in the past, she herself must be the problem.

ArbCom’s final decision: Lightbreather was banned from editing Wikipedia for a minimum of one year.

\* \* \*

As the Internet’s single largest source of free information, Wikipedia has faced skepticism about its credibility since it was founded by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger in 2001. But according to a 2011 study from the Pew Research Center, 53 percent of Americans use the site, up from only 36 percent in 2007. Interestingly, the more educated someone is, the more likely he or she is to consult Wikipedia. Almost 70 percent of Americans with college degrees read Wikipedia. Google now pulls directly from the crowd-sourced encyclopedia, so even people who never visit the site read it. Today, it’s the seventh most-visited website in the world.

But Wikipedia has changed in other ways since its founding, too. Wales said when he created the site it would be based on a “culture of thoughtful, diplomatic honesty” and a “neutral point of view”—but over time, that point of view came to be dominated by whoever joined Wikipedia first and wrote the most. As a result, Wikipedia has become a kind of Internet oligarchy, where those who have been around the longest have the most control.

“Most people look at Wikipedia, and see the text, and assume that it’s unproblematically produced by volunteers and always on a trajectory to improvement,” said Julia Adams, a sociologist at Yale University who’s studying how academic knowledge is portrayed on Wikipedia. “But that is simply not the case.”

ArbCom is a prime example. Because ArbCom members are mostly male, biases appear in the committee’s decision-making, said Molly White, an editor who goes by GorillaWarfare on Wikipedia and is one of ArbCom’s two female members. ArbCom members also tend to be white, formally educated, and from the global north, she added. “I don’t think anyone on the Arbitration Committee is intentionally trying to keep women and other minorities out of Wikipedia, but I do think that the decisions sometimes have that effect,” White said.

In 2011, an internal study estimated that less than 10 percent of Wikipedia editors are female. The disparity is even starker among more experienced editors: Another study from 2011, out of the University of Minnesota, showed that only 6 percent of contributors with more than 500 edits are women. “Whatever the numbers are, we do want to see them higher,” said Katherine Maher, the Wikimedia Foundation’s senior communications officer.

Shortly after the 2011 studies were published, the Wikimedia Foundation set a goal to have women make up 25 percent of its contributors by this year—but, as Wales told the BBC last year, the initiative “completely failed.”

“The 25-percent thing became a joke for anybody who was actively working in the gender gap,” said Sarah Stierch, who spent a year on contract with the Wikimedia Foundation to make the site more friendly to women. During her tenure, she helped to create programs that would encourage women to participate, like the Teahouse, a space for new editors to ask questions and find mentors. However, in 2014, she was dismissed from Wikipedia for allegedly editing articles on behalf of paying clients. Stierch declined to comment on the terms of her dismissal.\*\*\*\*

A Wikimedia spokesperson said the Foundation is currently preparing a “plan of action” to combat harassment. It currently has initiatives like the Inspire Campaign that provide grant funding for individual projects aimed at increasing the number of female editors. Wikimedia gave out \$250,000 in funding to proposals addressing the gender gap this spring, creating editor meetups with childcare and hosting workshops for admins who want to understand how sexism affects the site. But even in this project—specifically intended to increase women’s participation—only 34 percent of people who submitted proposals identified themselves as female.

When institutions like Wikipedia “involve systematic distortion, then we get farther and farther away from accurate understandings of the world,” said Adams. “And that presents all kinds of problems—some of them trivial, some of them quite big.”

The gender disparity among editors, in other words, has led to serious issues with Wikipedia’s content. One longtime editor, the Chicago-based college student Emily Temple-Wood, said she’s identified almost than 4,400 female scientists who meet Wikipedia’s standards for notability, but don’t have a page. And in 2013, a *New York Times* reporter discovered that all female novelists had been removed from the list of American novelists and relegated to their own list, “American woman novelists.” (The

pages have since been combined back into one.) As a study by researchers in Germany and Switzerland found earlier this year, the pages that do exist about notable women are more likely to mention their gender and relationship status than articles about men.

Wikipedia is suffering from a cyclical kind of sexism: A lack of female editors means that its content can be hostile to women, which in turn drives away potential female editors. In 2011, Sue Gardner, then the executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation, compiled examples from women about why they don't edit Wikipedia, culled from message boards around the Internet. One woman pointed out that in pages for movies, rape scenes are often called "sex scenes" or sometimes even, "making love." "When people try to change it, editors change it back and note that unlike 'sex,' the word 'rape' is not neutral, so it should be left out," she wrote. "Discovering that feature was really jarring and made me feel unwelcome there."

But challenging the status quo on Wikipedia is no easy task. All the Wikipedia contributors interviewed said that if a woman wants to last as an editor on the site, there are certain fights she just doesn't pick.

"When you put 'feminism' in anything on Wikipedia, all hell breaks loose," said Stierch. "I've been called a Feminazi more times than I can count."



“The lunatics are running the asylum,” she added. “And the non-profit that operates it can’t even control them. What do you do when you don’t have a principal to tell all the kids to behave?”

To avoid becoming targets of harassment, some editors use gender-neutral pseudonyms and avoid linking any personal information to their usernames. White, for example, said that she noticed a turning point in her treatment on Wikipedia after she allowed the Wikimedia Foundation to post a photo of her with her username. Other users on the site then dug to find her real name, address, more photographs, and details about her family.

Historically, Wikipedia may not be that different from the very first encyclopedias, which developed as a way for educated men to communicate with each other and create foundational knowledge, said Gina Luria Walker, an intellectual historian and associate professor of women’s studies at The New School. Around 150 men contributed to the great encyclopedia of the Enlightenment, Walker pointed out, but no women did. The very first version of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, written between 1768 and 1771, featured 39 pages on curing disease in horses, and three words on woman: “female of man.”

“When white men have been editing history since day one, they don’t see this as a problem,” Stierch said.

Women like White, Temple-Wood, and Stierch are working towards something like balance. A few years ago, Stierch ran an edit-a-thon at the Smithsonian to create Wikipedia articles for women in science. Among the pages that the volunteers created was a page for Clare Hasse, a botanist in the early 20th century whose work saved the oranges in Florida from disease, essentially preventing Florida’s economy from

tanking. It was nominated for deletion soon after it was created.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> But it's there now.

Temple-Wood says that she and her partners have created hundreds of articles for missing female scientists, and they have thousands more to go. “A lot of the women I work with on Wikipedia really care about making these biographies accessible on the web, because you know, if it's not on Wikipedia it doesn't exist,” said Temple-Wood. “These women need to be written back into history.”

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*\* This article has been updated to clarify the nature of the role of several sources in Wikimedia's treatment of women. We regret the errors.*

*\*\* This article originally stated that Eric Corbett is a Wikimedia administrator. Although he is currently an editor, he has been banned from editing in the past due to his conduct towards other editors.*

*\*\*\* This article originally misstated the number of people on the Arbitration Committee.*

*\*\*\*\* This article originally stated that Sarah Stierch did not continue her work for Wikipedia because her contract was not renewed, and did not mention the reason for her dismissal.*

*\*\*\*\*\* This article originally stated that the article flagged for removal was about Nellie Brown, and that it was flagged within two minutes.*