



Wikipedia's Politics of Exclusion: Gender, Epistemology, and Feminist Rhetorical (In)action

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Abstract

Compositionists have celebrated Wikipedia as a space that privileges collaborative, public writing and complicates traditional notions of authorship and revision. Yet, this scholarship has not considered the implications of Wikipedia's "gender gap"—the highly disproportionate number of male editors over female editors. In this article, I explore how Wikipedia functions as a rhetorical discourse community whose conventions exclude and silence feminist ways of knowing and writing. Drawing on textual analysis of Wikipedia's editorial policies, as well as interviews with female users, I argue that Wikipedia's insistence on separating embodied subjectivity from the production of knowledge limits the site's ability to facilitate any substantial, subversive feminist rhetorical action. These limitations, I suggest, should inform a critical pedagogical approach to Wikipedia.

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Keywords: Epistemology; Discourse communities; Wikipedia; Feminist rhetorics; Feminist activism

1. Wikipedia's "woman problem"

According to a 2011 Pew study, 53% of American internet users—both men and women—look for information on Wikipedia (Zickuhr & Rainie, 2011).¹ Wikipedia's influence extends into the classroom as well, as teachers of writing are no doubt aware: 52% of college students in a 2010 study say they "always" or "frequently" use Wikipedia during school-related research (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). This, one might argue, is good news: our field has been quick to praise Wikipedia as a collaborative site of writing and knowledge production that emphasizes revision and challenges traditional models of textual authority and authorship (Brown, 2009; Cummings, 2008; Hood, 2009; Purdy, 2009). Yet, while compositionists may be optimistic for its potential to democratize the production of knowledge, the fact remains that a scant 13% of Wikipedia's contributors are women (Glott, Schmidt, & Ghosh, 2010). Wikipedia's *gender gap* is significant enough that the Wikimedia Foundation, which operates Wikipedia, has announced an initiative that aims to raise the share of female contributors to a modest 25 percent by 2015 (Cohen, 2011).

These statistics suggest a rather large inequity in terms of who is producing and sustaining Wikipedia's epistemological community—instead of being active producers of knowledge on Wikipedia, women are more often than not

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¹ This number is nearly evenly divided between men and women: Pew's 2011 study found that 56% of American men and 50% of American women who use the internet have gone to Wikipedia to locate information (Zickuhr & Rainie).

Feminist movement

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"Women's Lib" redirects here. For the Goodies episode, see *Women's Lib (The Goodies)*.



This article is written like a **personal reflection or essay** rather than an encyclopedic description of the subject. Please help improve it by rewriting it in an encyclopedic style. (April 2010)

The **feminist movement** (also known as the **Women's Movement**, **Women's Liberation**, or **Women's Lib**) refers to a series of campaigns for reforms on issues such as **reproductive rights**, **domestic violence**, **maternity leave**, **equal pay**, **women's suffrage**, **sexual harassment** and **sexual violence**. The movement's priorities vary among nations and communities and range from opposition to **female genital mutilation** in one country or to the **glass ceiling** in another.



Fig. 1. Wikipedia entry for “Feminist movement”.

positioned as passive consumers.² It seems that men are the ones overwhelmingly writing—and determining what counts as “good writing”—on Wikipedia. Take, for example, the Wikipedia entry for “Feminist Movement” (Fig. 1). This article had been flagged as needing “cleanup” because “it is written like a personal reflection or essay.” Wikipedia then asked that users “improve it” by “rewriting it in an encyclopedic style.” In the editorial guidelines that inform these comments, Wikipedia explicitly values an “objective,” detached, “encyclopedic” way of writing, and thus, only certain types of knowledge are deemed acceptable in this collaborative digital space. In contrast, feminist scholars have long contested the common distinction between “objective” knowledge and subjective knowledge derived from the embodied positions of women and feminists (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1993). Ironically, then, this entry suggests that Wikipedia would let users write about feminism, but not from the embodied position of a feminist.

While many compositionists have been eager to accept wikis (and Wikipedia more specifically) as a valuable writing technology and pedagogical tool (Hood, 2009; McClure, 2011; Purdy, 2010), I suggest that Wikipedia may, in fact, carry some problematic implications for feminist teachers of writing. Although Wikipedia endorses an “encyclopedic style” that presupposes objectivity and claims to be open to everyone (part of its appeal is the supposed “democratization of knowledge”), I argue that it, in fact, privileges patriarchal methodologies and epistemologies. In this article, I consider how and why Wikipedia endorses exclusionary epistemologies, and how we as teachers of writing might work with our students to challenge it. After I explore how Wikipedia functions as a rhetorical discourse community, I offer a close textual analysis of Wikipedia’s community and editorial policies. The community’s large gender gap, I claim, has profound implications in terms of what kind of writing and knowledge is valued (or even presented) in one of the world’s largest and most visible encyclopedic resources. I then turn to interviews with female Wikipedia editors to consider how they navigate a space that excludes particular (feminist) ways of knowing and writing. Although Wikipedia operates on the premise that a writer’s embodied subjectivity is unrelated to the production of knowledge, the women who participated in my study indicated that local and experiential knowledge was instead central to their writing processes. In particular, these interviews demonstrate how women have developed sophisticated rhetorical strategies to write into a space where their knowledges may otherwise be devalued. I conclude by offering strategies that teachers and students alike can employ to challenge the epistemological normativity of Wikipedia, arguing that digital feminist activists must both occupy and resist the sites that we wish to subvert.

2. Wikipedia’s (exclusionary) discourse community

Wikipedia is perhaps the most visible instance of the wiki, a technology that has been around since the early days of the internet but gained popularity around 2003 (Kohl, Liebert, & Metten, 2009, p. 167). Wikis allow multiple users to collaboratively write and edit hypertexts—in Wikipedia’s case, the goal is to collaboratively create an openly accessible online encyclopedia. Wikipedia bills itself as “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” and is built on the belief that its users are an incredible source of knowledge (“Wikipedia Main Page,” 2015). While it’s difficult to say for

² It is important to recognize that there are likely other demographic imbalances on Wikipedia, encompassing age, class, race, education, and more. Glott, Schmidt, & Ghosh (2010) noted that Wikipedians tend to skew younger (the average age of editors is 25.22) and typically have at least a high school or undergraduate education (p. 7). However, this survey—the most comprehensive study of Wikipedia editors to date—did not ask participants about their racial or economic backgrounds. A different study found that 43% of black American internet users and 40% of Hispanic American internet users look for information on Wikipedia (compared to 55% of white American internet users), but this study only measures readership, not authorship (Zickuhr & Rainie, 2011). That is, the study does not delineate how many of these readers actually contribute to Wikipedia.

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