

## CHAPTER 14

# Decolonizing Wikipedia

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Wikipedia is the largest, most widely available reference work of its kind. Its ubiquity ensures its use by almost everyone and shapes the way information is presented in everything from public websites to scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia is the most widely available of open educational resources (OER) and is used by learners in both formal and informal settings. But unlike most OER, which are selected and assigned by the instructor, the content students find on Wikipedia is outside the control of instructors.

When I taught introductory biology, students would send me emails asking to explain things I had neither covered in class nor discussed in the textbook. Sure enough, I would find the terminology or concept they asked about when I checked Wikipedia. As a Wikipedian, I found this validating—after all, you contribute to Wikipedia in the hope that someone will find your additions useful. But as an instructor, I found it alarming that students were learning from a source created outside the norms of knowledge creation and curation.<sup>2,3</sup> Wikipedia's incredible value as an OER is tempered by the fact that a large part of the knowledge curation is done by interested amateurs.

Wikipedia's coverage of the world's knowledge is uneven in systemic ways that reflect the world's broader systemic inequalities. This is particularly true on the English Wikipedia, the largest language version with more than six million articles. Perhaps the best-known issue is the gender gap<sup>4</sup>—Wikipedia has fewer articles about women, the women who have biographies on Wikipedia are more notable than the men who do, articles about women are more likely to discuss their husbands (and their husbands' jobs), their role in mentoring, and the fact that they were role models to other women.<sup>5</sup>

Less well-known are the biases in geographic content. Most geotagged articles on Wikipedia are in the global north. The densely populated parts of Asia are less well-represented, while coverage of much of Africa is especially poor.<sup>6</sup> Looking across language versions, European countries are best covered in their

native languages, while countries in the Global South are usually covered best in a foreign language, frequently the language of their former colonizers.<sup>7</sup> This disparity is made more acute since topics that are well-covered attract more traffic and receive more edits. This results in a positive feedback cycle in which poorly covered topics fall further behind.<sup>8</sup>

## Origin Stories

Wikipedia's origin has been called a "happy accident." Jimmy Wales had set out to build "the finest encyclopedia in the history of humankind" that could be available throughout the world for only the cost of printing, but the project struggled to find expert contributors and reviewers able to volunteer their time.<sup>9</sup> So on January 15, 2001, a new, simpler project was launched. Based on simple wiki software that anyone could edit, the project grew rapidly into a useful encyclopedia. As Joseph Reagle's analysis of the first ten thousand edits to Wikipedia has shown, there was a lot of "dreck" amidst the early contributions, but the good content grew quickly and blossomed into something usable.<sup>10</sup>

While the Wikipedia community included academics, even in its earliest days, a lot of the people who joined were simply enthusiastic people interested in building a better internet. People wrote about topics they were familiar with, often drawing on what they knew or could find online. While the community was international from its inception, it also reflected the fact that only a small part of the world's population was online in 2001, and many were still using dial-up modems and paying by the minute for their internet access. When I made my first edits to Wikipedia in 2004, I was doing both these things while based in Trinidad and Tobago.

Beyond this, the adoption of the model of Wikipedians as volunteers may have posed an additional barrier to involvement, since volunteerism tends to be seen as a mode of contribution in which privileged individuals, especially from the Global North, "give back" to those who are less well off. A more cooperative frame for collectively building a shared project may be a more effective way to attract people from less individualistic cultures.<sup>11</sup> All of these factors resulted in a community of contributors who were not representative of the world whose knowledge they were trying to document. While the online community has changed a lot in the last twenty years, Wikipedia's volunteer community remains unrepresentative of the world at large.

In its early period, Wikipedia needed content. More content drew more traffic, which in turn attracted more contributors.<sup>12</sup> While much of this was produced by volunteer editors, public domain sources provided a valuable way to supplement their contributions. The 1911 edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the 1913

*Catholic Encyclopedia* were both out of copyright and became available online after they were scanned and digitized. As a work produced by the US federal government, the *CIA World Factbook* was another source whose content could be incorporated into the nascent Wikipedia. Much of this content has been reworked or rewritten since then, but the influence of these sources remains, often with a somewhat nineteenth century feel to their prose. With 11,843 articles tagged as incorporating text from the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and 4,870 incorporating text from the 1913 *Catholic Encyclopedia*,<sup>13</sup> that influence isn't trivial.

When Wikipedians rely on older sources, they run the risk of importing outdated attitudes into the encyclopedia. The “Geography of Trinidad and Tobago” article until recently still included a line, “Area—comparative: slightly smaller than Delaware.”<sup>14</sup> The article on Sir Norman Lamont says, “He went out to Trinidad where he owned a sugar plantation”<sup>15</sup>—language reminiscent of a time when Britain was the center of an empire.<sup>16</sup> Coming from Trinidad and Tobago, this sort of writing reinforces the sense that I come from somewhere lesser and implicitly questions my right to contribute to the project *as an equal*.

## A Colonizing Encyclopedia?

Wikipedia asks you to imagine, in the words of Jimmy Wales, “a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge,”<sup>17</sup> but it is important to consider who collects that knowledge, and how it is collated and curated. The realities of the digital divide mean that billions of people without internet access are excluded from the process of writing Wikipedia.<sup>18</sup>

Carwil Bjork-James describes his encounter with the 2005 debate on the English Wikipedia over which topic should exist at the page named “Java” on Wikipedia. Until September 12, the article about the Indonesian island had occupied that space, but on that day someone replaced it with an article about the programming language. In the ensuing debate, one Wikipedian commented, “I don't know of a single person who is familiar with the island.”<sup>19</sup>

The fact that reasonable voices won out and the community decided to retain the island as the primary topic for Java is a testament to the reasonableness of the Wikipedian community, but the fact that this was something worthy of debate illustrates a fundamental weakness. The community that writes Wikipedia is disproportionately white, male, well-educated, and lives in the Global North. The community is disproportionately technology-oriented. The idea that we should weigh the merits of an island with 150 million people against those of a programming language is absurd on its face, but not if you apply rules to decide

that are based on coverage in sources—worse yet, when you’re contrasting the sources that were available online in late 2005.

This wasn’t an intentional effort to marginalize the people of Indonesia. The person who said they didn’t know anyone familiar with the island wasn’t trying to elicit a spit-take; it seems likely that they expected most people to be in a similar position to them. And they saw shared ignorance as a valid argument: no one like me knows anything about this, so it can’t be important.

In an environment like this, a person of color or an editor from the developing world feels like an outsider. Your labor is welcome, of course, because the uncredited labor of people like you has always been welcome in building the edifices of the Global North. But if you choose to join the conversation about shaping the direction of the encyclopedia (or even the main topic for “Java”), you need to carefully consider how to present yourself. If I declare my identity, I risk being labeled as someone seeking to advance my agenda at the expense of Wikipedia’s best interests. But if I don’t declare it, I implicitly validate the idea that white men from the Global North are the best people to decide what the world of knowledge should look like.

Debates on Wikipedia can be heated, and editors often mention the need for a thick skin. Despite the existence of a policy banning personal attacks,<sup>20</sup> comments may become personal and can cross the line into misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, or racially charged language. This creates added barriers for precisely the types of editors that Wikipedia needs to diversify the editing community.<sup>21</sup>

Wikipedia is, in the words of Alexandria Lockett “a subtle form of information warfare against colonized populations” who are conditioned to “[feel] as if you cannot and should not ‘disrupt’ the information architecture.”<sup>22</sup>

The Wikipedia community has always been aware of the problems posed by this systemic bias.<sup>23</sup> A WikiProject<sup>24</sup> aimed at countering systemic bias has existed on the English Wikipedia since October 4, 2004, when a Wikipedian who went by the username ChrisG gathered several existing conversations into a centralized location.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Wikimedia Foundation addresses this issue as part of its mission for “knowledge equity.”<sup>26</sup> But the problem is intertwined with the policies that make Wikipedia what it is and, potentially, those who have allowed it to function as a high-quality reference work.

## The Problems with Policy

An encyclopedia that *anyone* can contribute to only works if you have rules that determine what can and cannot be included. A traditional encyclopedia relies on the authority of the subject matter experts who are its contributors. They act as

gatekeepers, determining what is worthy of inclusion and deciding how to weigh the competing arguments in the literature. These contributors are recruited for their subject matter expertise, and their time is a major bottleneck in the process of completing the final product. In Wikipedia's model of commons-based peer production,<sup>27</sup> contributors can fill neither of these roles on their own authority because the identity of individual contributors is subsumed into the mass of faceless contributors hidden behind pseudonyms.<sup>28</sup>

When you can't rely on the authority of your editors, the only way to avoid anarchy is through a rules-based system of contributions. While these rules have made Wikipedia possible, they also pose a barrier to the work of decolonization.

To be covered in the encyclopedia, a topic must be "notable." In the context of policy on the English Wikipedia,<sup>29</sup> notability is a term of art that usually refers to the general notability guideline (usually abbreviated GNG) which says, "A topic is presumed to be suitable for a stand-alone article or list when it has received significant coverage in reliable sources that are independent of the subject."<sup>30</sup> To further complicate the matter, "significant coverage," "reliable sources," and "independent of the subject" are all terms whose precise meanings are worked out, in context, through a consensus-building process (or failing that, a vote).

The goal of this policy is to provide a barrier against the inclusion of trivia. The idea is that if a topic has been covered by reliable sources, it is probably important enough for Wikipedia to cover. And if it hasn't been covered, it probably isn't. This policy builds on an older policy—verifiability.<sup>31</sup> The verifiability policy exists to keep hoaxes out of Wikipedia, but it is also effective in excluding topics that haven't been covered by mainstream publications.<sup>32</sup>

While the notability and verifiability policies define two of the three borders of what Wikipedia can cover, the sourcing policy creates the third and perhaps the most challenging border. Source quality is culturally determined—the community decides whether to accept a source as reliable or not. But it's not just the "community" in a broad sense, it's the portion of the community that is interested enough to show up to discuss the quality of a source. Participation, and the degree to which the participants are knowledgeable about a source, can have a huge impact on the acceptability of less well-known sources.<sup>33</sup> This is particularly true for sources in languages other than English; not all articles that should meet the notability threshold (e.g., articles about towns in Libya or national politicians in Laos) will do so if we only rely on English-language sources.

A combination of the notability, verifiability, and reliable sources policies ensure that inclusion on Wikipedia is based on (mostly) external criteria. This allows the community to outsource some of the decision-making about what to cover. The problem, though, is that this means that the biases present in outside sources are reproduced in Wikipedia's coverage. It is difficult for Wikipedia to

do a better job than the available sources. Fixing the gap in Wikipedia’s coverage for women would require, according to Katherine Maher, “journalists, book publishers, scientific researchers, curators, academics, grant-makers and prize-awarding committees [to] recognize the work of women.”<sup>34</sup> And while this can be addressed for contemporary people, the contributions of underrepresented people in history may be lost forever to Wikipedia.

Throughout all this, the problem remains that Wikipedia’s inclusion policies are “bias[ed] toward Western, rational, and print-centric knowledge-making practices.”<sup>35</sup> While these policies play a crucial role in keeping hoaxes out of Wikipedia, they also ensure that its content coverage will be based on a system that gives priority to the interests of media and academics in the Global North.<sup>36</sup>

## A Cost and Benefit of Openness

Wikipedia’s image selection in articles is decidedly dated. People have often asked why Wikipedia tends to use historic photographs, even to illustrate modern landscapes. Why the preference for out-of-date images? The answer, which is surprising to many people (but not to people in the OER community) is that Wikipedia uses these images because their copyrights have expired. Openness has been an immense benefit to Wikipedia and has been important in its growth into a near-ubiquitous resource.

An old image of a familiar landscape can draw the viewer to consider what has changed. But an old image of an unfamiliar landscape can reinforce existing perceptions. Images of urban rail in Casablanca or Addis Ababa can challenge these stereotypes,<sup>37</sup> but they are only available to challenge these perceptions because someone chose to upload their images to Wikimedia Commons (or released them under a compatible license on Flickr), which meant that they were available for a participant in Wiki Education’s Student Program to add to the article they were expanding on urban rail in Africa.<sup>38</sup>

Many parts of the world have modernized at a remarkable pace in the last few decades, but you might not know that from Wikipedia. The use of historic imagery reinforces the perception that the developing world is backward. Photographic contests like the annual Wiki Loves Africa contest<sup>39</sup> have done a lot to expand coverage, but because they are contests, they favor the inclusion of spectacular, interesting, or exoticizing imagery over the mundane. When the contests are judged through the eyes of the Global North, the effect is heightened—no one wants to give awards for the kind of thing they can see regularly in their own backyards. But as long as the developing world is portrayed on Wikipedia through this lens, it remains *exotic*.

If we want to push back against the perception of the developing world as backward, we need to improve the way we present it visually.

## Governance

The Wikimedia Foundation (WMF) is a central player in the governance of Wikipedia and its sister projects. Their control of the movement strategy process and funds dissemination to chapters, thematic groups, and user groups within the movement makes them a powerful player both in efforts to decolonize Wikipedia and as a force that preserves the status quo. While its staff and board of trustees are diverse by American standards, they are not representative of the world at large. For example, there is zero representation from African, Caribbean, or Pacific countries (OACPS countries) on either the board<sup>40</sup> or the leadership team.<sup>41</sup>

While they had good intentions, the nature of the power structure reinforces the colonized nature of Wikipedia. They cannot tell *our* stories if *we* are not represented. At the same time, if they stray too far outside the Wikimedia community, they risk drawing criticism for putting power in the hands of individuals and groups who don't understand the community. In the short term, this causes tensions between elements of the community who are concerned about being marginalized in a project they built and elements in the community who see the need to devolve power to the global majority as part of the mission to work toward knowledge equity.

The future of governance within the movement lies not with the resolution of tensions between these groups but rather in the true decolonization of the governance process. At this point, we stand where the global empires stood on the eve of the modern era of decolonization—aware of the moral imperative to devolve power and extend some measure of home rule to the global majority but imagining a special role for themselves during a decades-long transition to responsible governance.

If the lessons of history are meaningful, the Wikimedia community should be prepared for a shift in power that could happen much quicker than people imagine. We seem to assume that people in the Global South don't know “how to Wikipedia,” and that while they may eventually be able to learn, it will happen through the dissemination of knowledge from colonizer to colonized. But power meant to be carefully devolved can also be claimed by the grassroots.<sup>42</sup>

## Diversifying the Voices

When Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna's win of the 2020 Nobel Prize for Chemistry was announced, I felt an immediate sense of gratitude for

work done by Laura Hoopes two years earlier when she had participated as a Wiki Scholar in a program run by Wiki Education. As part of the course, Hoopes rewrote Doudna's biography, expanding its coverage of her work on CRISPR—very useful information for any reader coming to Wikipedia to learn about this new Nobel laureate. But equally important, Hoopes reframed Doudna's biography so that she was no longer interpreted through the lens of the men in her life.<sup>43</sup>

Through its Student Program, Wiki Education brings about 16,000 student editors to Wikipedia each year: 59 percent of these students identify as women and 42 percent as non-white. These students make up about 19 percent of active editors on the English Wikipedia. Although limited to college and university students in the United States and Canada, this influx of student editors makes a significant impact on the demographics of Wikipedia's editors.<sup>44</sup> These students have access to the latest scholarly literature and are supervised by faculty members who can help steer them toward modern, inclusive scholarship.

Other groups working in a similar space to diversify the population of Wikipedia contributors include AfroCROWD, Women in Red, Black Lunch Table, Art + Feminism, and Whose Knowledge. AfroCROWD works to diversify Wikipedia's contributor base by expanding participation and awareness among people of African descent.<sup>45</sup> Women in Red is a WikiProject that works to reduce systemic bias by improving coverage of women on Wikipedia.<sup>46</sup> Black Lunch Table<sup>47</sup> and Art + Feminism<sup>48</sup> work to improve the coverage of the arts and artists, while Whose Knowledge works to make the internet "less white, male, straight, and Global North in origin."<sup>49</sup>

Adding more diversity to Wikipedia's pool of contributors while recruiting these contributors to fill gaps in Wikipedia's coverage is a valuable part of the toolkit to decolonize Wikipedia. But as Bjork-James points out, this strategy "shouldn't form the only horizon of our work."<sup>50</sup> Academia needs to focus on ways to write marginalized people back into history, and Wikipedia needs to collaborate more closely with the academics who are doing this work. An interesting example of this is the work by Cipta Media Ekspresi and Wikimedia Indonesia to implement research projects that documented oral indigenous knowledge.<sup>51</sup> Not only were they able to document traditional songs (which were never recorded in a format compatible with Wikipedia) they also documented traditional birthing practices from the last practitioner familiar with the entire process.

## Speaking for Ourselves

What brought me to Wikipedia was a chance to invert the traditional model of knowledge creation as it applies to the developing world—or at least one little corner of the developing world. Here was a chance to shape the way the Caribbean



was presented to the world, instead of being observed and written about by outsiders. I set out to change the way the Caribbean, its society, its history, and its peoples were represented.<sup>52</sup> I believe I have made a valuable contribution to Wikipedia, but the contributions of any one person aren't enough. Samuel Baltz created 264 new pages for women political scientists in 2020, but only boosted the proportion of women in the category by about 5 percent.<sup>53</sup>

Working with the Wikimedians of the Caribbean user group (WikiCari) over the last two years has opened my eyes to new opportunities and new limitations. Most people know that they *can* make edits to Wikipedia, but they don't know that Wikipedia *needs them*, especially if they have specialized knowledge to offer. Caribbean academics and their students are uniquely positioned to contribute decolonized perspectives to Wikipedia. But there is also a wealth of knowledge that has never been documented in reliable sources. Worse yet, there is information that was documented inaccurately, either by well-meaning academics who didn't get things right or by biased sources that happen to be the only ones that meet Wikipedia's standards. At the same time, there are practitioners and artists, historians, archaeologists, environmentalists, naturalists, and folklorists, many of them with experience in higher education, who nonetheless have never recorded this knowledge in what the Wikipedia community could consider a reliable source.

A group like WikiCari can either adopt the role of client, relying on good relations within the movement to open doors for more people like us, or it can work as part of a movement to re-center knowledge production on the voices and sources of the Global South. There's work to be done, but there's also the opportunity for us, as colonized people, to tell our stories as Wikipedia editors. Because when you see yourself in the world, when you take the plunge and participate in the process as an equal, it changes things for you, and it changes things for those who come after you.<sup>54</sup>

## Acknowledgments

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## Endnotes

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