

Neutrality in the Face of Reckless Hate

Wikipedia and GamerGate

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Bio

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Introduction

The year 2015 will very likely be remembered as a turning point in video game industry and culture. While tensions were slowly escalating regarding diversity of representation in video games across the cultural sphere and the position and treatment of women and other minorities within the industry, these insular debates finally, and violently, broke into mainstream consciousness in the second half of 2014. As we grimly note the one-year anniversary of the birth of the amorphous movement called GamerGate, the games industry is showing slow but hopeful signs of change regarding inclusion and representation of gender and ethnic diversity. Meanwhile, since GamerGate as a movement strives to achieve its self-declared goal of "ethics in video game journalism" primarily through constant and brutal harassment of women across the cultural space of games,

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their frequent targets are slowly and painfully trying to rebuild their lives.

While the impact of GamerGate on various aspects of the games industry and culture will be profound and potentially transformative, the controversy also served as a stark example for key issues regarding inclusivity among the Wikipedia community. Approaching its fifteenth year online, the knowledge presented and propagated through Wikipedia is as prevalent as ever. Over the years, the combined utility and breadth available to daily users has easily overcome reservations regarding its reliability. While it is safe to argue that consulting Wikipedia has become entirely normalized, the understanding that anyone can edit the encyclopedia remains as stunted as ever among the millions who directly consult the site daily, or are exposed to its contents through other aggregators.

As part of a struggle to capture their encyclopedic value by the community, controversies in the wider world-reenacted in the talk pages and numerous revisions of relevant articles-is par for the course for Wikipedia. However, GamerGate represents a notable case. When proponents of GamerGate adopted the online encyclopedia as a battleground in their campaign of harassment against notable women in the games industry, the ensuing edit wars, the handling of these incidents by the Wikipedia community, and the public perception these became emblematic of the broader struggles of the Wikipedia

community with diversity in general and gender balance in particular.

At the center of this perception of the Wikipedia community were a number of cases regarding the actions of a number of editors that were brought to the Arbitration Committee, the highest governing body of the community.

During the laborious and protracted decision-making process of the Arbitration Committee, inaccurate reports on its possible actions were widely circulated and commented on in the wider media. The immediate consensus amongst the coverage was that, although the Wikipedia community may have upheld their policies and was arriving a decision that was internally consistent, the members of the Arbitration Committee, members of the Wikimedia Foundation, and the Wikipedia community in general failed the victims of GamerGate attacks. Regardless of their intentions and the longer-term resolution of the conflict, this reporting arguably sent a strong and lasting message across online communities that Wikipedia is not a safe and welcoming space. In light of the chronic gender and diversity gap amongst the Wikipedia community, these events may have grave consequences and require deeper reflection.

Therefore, while this article expands on the Arbitration Committee case, its focus will not be on the details of the case. Although the members of the Arbitration Committee can be argued to have performed their assigned duties, the wider perception of their decisions and the framing of the events as a whole in media outlets has the potential to cast a longer-lasting and darker shadow over the entire Wikipedia project. Based on this premise, this article aims to consider some of the unforeseen, and often collateral, consequences of the adoption of Neutral Point of View, arguably *the* defining policy of Wikipedia as a knowledge-creation enterprise and the concept of consensus that lies at its heart ("Wikipedia", n.d.-a). Although these principles have shaped the community from the beginning and inform daily behavior and long-term policy decisions, they remain widely unknown and misunderstood by the millions who access Wikipedia. Deserving discussion are the ways that the community's stance and particular adoption of this principle has profound consequences on that same community's future health and growth.

In this article I will briefly provide an overview of the events that led to the Arbitration Committee's involvement and look at the perception of outside observers regarding the reaction of the Wikipedia community. Subsequently, in light of these recent events, I will evaluate the chronic problem of the gender gap within the Wikipedia community and discuss its potential implications for the online encyclopedia's fundamental principles.

Before moving on to discuss the particular impact of the GamerGate controversy on Wikipedia, and the wider implications of the coverage of this impact on the current and future state of the Wikipedia community, it is necessary to review of the origin and evolution of the movement that came to be known as GamerGate in order to provide context and perspective. Once again, the wider public perception of the the movement's actions arguably bears more significance than GamerGate's declared motivations in determining its impact on the video game industry and community.

A Brief History of GamerGate

The series of events that later came to be grouped under the banner GamerGate were ignited in August of 2014, when a disgruntled ex-boyfriend of game developer Zoe Quinn accused Ms. Quinn of having intimate relations with a journalist who then allegedly gave positive publicity to her game *Depression Quest* (Lewis, 2015). His accusations resonated immediately and powerfully with a small group of self-identified video game enthusiasts who perceived themselves to be the persecuted minority within a growing community which, in later years, began to include a much more diverse population. As video games, both as an art form and an industry, have grown significantly over the years, its primary demographic of a male, White and teenage audience has also begun to show signs of shifting (Entertainment Software Association, 2015). With their rising prominence across a wider culture, games have also started attracting serious cultural criticism. As part of this growing interest, feminist and social critique has received strong attention from within and outside the gaming community by drawing attention to inclusion and representation of women and other traditional minorities.

Since the proliferation of the form in the 1970s, the initial formulation of video game communities has been culturally constructed as a refuge for social outcasts and people who otherwise see themselves as misfits. Certain members of this community for whom a significant part of their identity was built around the past norms of gaming culture saw these recent changes as a deliberate attack on a space they perceived as belonging to their community. For outside observers, and many members of the industry, the broadening of the potential audience was a positive development tied to the maturation of the form and could only benefit the entire community in the long-run. However, for a small, but vocal, portion of the entrenched members of the community, the changes initiated or demanded by these different voices seemed like a deliberate attack, led by people whom they pejoratively called *social justice warriors* (sjw) (Lewis, 2015).

Before these groups took on a public-facing banner organized under the premise of game journalism ethics and the name GamerGate certain notable feminist critics of games, like Anita Sarkeesian, were already targets of routine harassment (Valenti, 2015). Given this context, it is no surprise that the members of this group found the accusations against Zoe Quinn entirely within their preconceptions and immediately embraced the idea of widespread corruption in the gaming press.

In the ensuing months, leading feminist figures within the video game industry, like Anita Sarkeesian and Briana Wu, were also targeted similar to Zoe Quinn. All three women at some point in 2014 had to flee their homes, apply for police protection, and cancel professional engagements due to the intensity and seriousness of the threats they received (Lewis, 2015). In addition, a number of women decided to quit their journalism careers and have left the industry. Although an exhaustive catalog of the actions of the GamerGate movement would be beyond the scope of this investigation, it is worth noting that their members have taken these violent actions against their targets due to a perceived threat from feminist approaches to games and the potential of this approach to induce change in an otherwise insular and homogenous industry. Also noteworthy is that upon reporting these threats and harassments, the women who have left their homes due to safety reasons have been accused by some as seeking

attention and publicity (Lewis, 2015). The lack of empathy and the hostile reaction these women have received from online communities predominated by young, White males is significant and is revealing of the chronic problems experienced by the Wikipedia community in addressing its own gender gap.

Throughout these developments, the targeted women's Wikipedia pages were among the main vectors of harassment, with constant defacement and vandalism attempts. Additionally, the GamerGate article on Wikipedia has been one of the battlegrounds for the struggle between its supporters and detractors. This commentary's central problem is the apparent lack of empathy involved in the expectation of neutrality—that is, the process of establishing consensus between editors who sympathize with GamerGate and those who oppose it. The attempts of GamerGate supporters to influence relevant Wikipedia pages, and the struggle of a number of established Wikipedia editors in preventing these acts of vandalism, suddenly came into wider public consciousness when the actions of editors on both sides of the struggle came under review from Wikipedia's Arbitration Committee. Although the ultimate decision published by the ArbCom was not groundbreaking, the inaccurate portrayal of its workings and its potential decisions further exacerbated the perception of Wikipedia as an unwelcoming community towards women in general and topics related to feminism in particular. In the next section, I will briefly discuss the coverage of the ruling of the Arbitration Committee and its consequences.

Wikipedia as a Battleground

The debate surrounding the article "Gamergate Controversy" on Wikipedia was brought to the attention of the Arbitration Committee on November 10th, 2014, almost exactly two months after the initial creation of the stub (Wikipedia, n.d.-b). As per policy, the arbitrators voted to accept the case on the 25th of November (ibid.). However, the case only came into wider public view after January 19th, when a draft of the proposed decision was posted by one of the members of the committee (Wikipedia, n.d.-c).

Although this was not a binding document, only a draft of a proposal, it created a maelstrom of reporting concerning the state of Wikipedia. Mostly building on a series of blog posts by former Wikipedia

editor Mark Bernstein (2015a, b, c, d), *The Guardian* published a report on January 23rd, 2015 entitled "Wikipedia votes to ban some editors from gender-related articles" wherein the author Alex Hern argued that "Wikipedia's arbitration committee, the highest user-run body on the site, has voted to ban a number of editors from making corrections to articles about feminism, in an attempt to stop a long-running edit war over the entry on the "Gamergate controversy." A similar report by Dewey (2015) in *The Washington Post* carried the title "Gamergate, Wikipedia and the limits of 'human knowledge'", where it was argued that although Wikipedia has managed to produce a consensus on the "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", and "Global Warming", "GamerGate" has proved to be beyond the reach of the online encyclopedia to capture.

Overall, the reporting in both professional media outlets and blogs portrayed Wikipedia's Arbitration Committee as explicitly banning feminist editors from making edits to articles about GamerGate. These feminist editors were characterized as the last line of defense against GamerGate's supporters, who were trying to use the online encyclopedia to harass their targets.

Sensationalist and often sloppy reporting is common among many online publications and individuals with a vested interest can be expected to portray events through their bias. However, besides the accuracy of these reports, the supposed news that the Wikipedia community, as represented by the arbitration committee in the public eye, was being hostile against members who aimed to further the cause of feminism resonated with many, due to the common knowledge of Wikipedia's gender gap and other dysfunctions. In the next section, I will briefly review the conditions of the gender gap and consider a number of related characteristics in the Wikipedia community. In so doing, I evaluate how these characteristics are at the same time fundamental to the early success of the encyclopedia project, while also the probable cause of its problems in its maturity. I will also consider how these community characteristics are inextricably intertwined with the conditions of knowledge-creation that lie at the heart of the encyclopedia. This evaluation will lead us to the conclusion of this survey, where the possibility of resolution and its conditions will be discussed.

Consensus, Neutrality and the Gender Gap

At the core of the enterprise since its inception, the policy of Neutral Point of View (NPOV) has been a constant point of scrutiny (Wikipedia, n.d.-d). Some of the notable research in the area has focused on the underlying mechanics, assumptions, and consequences of this neutral stance (Reagle, 2006; Ortega 2009).

In my own research, I have traced the line of neutrality and distance of the encyclopedic gaze from its subject across the history of the form, aiming to provide a context for its evolution. I have argued that the three core content policies of "Neutral Point of View," "No Original Research" and "Verifiability" represent historically-consistent evolutions within the greater trend of encyclopedias distancing themselves from their subject matter, in an ultimate drive towards perceived objectivity and therefore authority (Salor, 2012).

Additionally, "Consensus," the conduct policy that is the stated basis for reaching decisions and for implementing the above stated policies has been a topic of interest (Wikipedia, n.d.-a). In his research, Reagle (2007; 2010) has discussed the emergent nature of leadership and the underlying principles of collaboration that can be observed within the Wikipedia community. His research, among others', points to a community that has managed to build on the foundations established by the open source software communities prevalent across the internet for decades. These had established specific notions regarding knowledge creation and organization. From an organizational stand point, with regards to content creation, it could be argued that the declared principles and policies of Wikipedia are an accurate description of the daily process through which the online encyclopedia operates.

While this internal consistency between principle and practice is noteworthy, and indeed remarkable, it does not contribute significantly to our understanding of the apparent failures of the community. In other words, although the current self-formulation of the Wikipedia community has produced the world's largest encyclopedia (indeed written by volunteers as organized by the declared principles of the community), those self-formulated principles and regulations have so far been ineffective at addressing one of the

most significant challenges the community has faced, namely the gender gap and its consequences. Given the persistent nature of the issue, it is worth considering the possibility that, despite being instrumental in the creation of the most comprehensive and widely used encyclopedia in history, the current formulations of NPOV and consensus might also foster attitudes within the Wikipedia community that lead its perception as a hostile, unsafe and unwelcoming space.

Though active members of the community, as well as some of the researchers working with Wikipedia, have been aware of the issue for some time, the Wikimedia Foundation publicly acknowledged the gender gap in 2011 following a survey that was undertaken as part of the tenth anniversary celebrations. It has continued to monitor the situation ever since (Wikipedia, n.d.-e). Although the Wikimedia Foundation has declared its intent to rectify this problem, in an interview with the BBC in August of 2014 Jimmy Wales admitted that the foundation and the community has "completely failed" to fix the gender imbalance (Hepker & Wales, 2014). Wales indicated in the interview that the foundation should focus on outreach efforts and software changes. Echoing Wales' sentiments, former Wikimedia Foundation Executive Sue Gardner cited nine reasons for the gap, offered by female Wikipedia editors:

1. A lack of user-friendliness in the editing interface;
2. Not having enough free time;
3. A lack of self-confidence;
4. Aversion to conflict and a disinterest in participating in lengthy edit wars;
5. Belief that their contributions will be reverted or deleted;
6. Some find its overall atmosphere misogynistic;
7. Wikipedia culture is sexual in ways they find off-putting;
8. Being addressed as male is off-putting to women whose primary language has grammatical gender;
9. Fewer opportunities than other sites for social relationships and a welcoming tone. (Wikipedia, n.d.-e)

So far, the most common tactic adopted by the community to address the gender gap has been the organization of edit-a-thons. With the aim of introducing new members to the Wikipedia interface and practices, while improving the content of the encyclopedia,

these social gatherings have focused on attracting women and other minorities to increase their presence within the community (Wikipedia, n.d.-f).

While such events have the best of intentions and are arguably of crucial importance as a long-term strategy for supplying new editors to the project, their effectiveness can only be partial if the issue of gender imbalance stems from endemic and cultural issues rather than a lack of technical affinity or familiarity. It is noteworthy that all the comments above from notable Wikimedia Foundation figures have focused on a sheer absence of numbers, noting a lack of interest on the part of the women and aiming to address this perceived lack through technical means. However, the recent events that revolved around the GamerGate controversy show that such an approach might be limited at best, and potentially misguided. Adopting such a quantitative solution-increasing the number of women editors who contribute to Wikipedia-to address what might be a qualitative problem either overlooks this possibility or accepts it as a feasible tactic based on a number of assumptions. Wade-witz (2013) highlights some of these assumptions, for example the notion that "it is the responsibility of women to fix sexism on Wikipedia" and "Women will make Wikipedia a nicer place." Ultimately, increasing the number of Wikipedia editors, especially among groups that are currently grossly underrepresented, is one of the Foundation's critical objectives for establishing the sustainable and healthy future of the encyclopedia; achieving, or striving towards this goal does not implicitly carry the promise of addressing cultural and structural problems within the Wikipedia community. More importantly, the future promise of more women and minorities to contribute to the project does not in any way absolve the current editors from challenging the established culture and questioning the shortcomings of their practices and attitudes.

Conclusion

Since its inception, Wikipedia has identified itself as a continuation of the western encyclopedic tradition (Wikipedia, n.d.-g). I have previously argued (Salor, 2012) that this identification is more apt than most realize, as what we now consider to be the greatest achievements of that tradition all carried within them a disruptive idea, approach or technique. While Wikipedia identified its encyclopedic nature in its

Core Content Policies, the community has, over the course of more than a decade, painstakingly tried to establish the related rules and regulations that would enable potentially anyone to participate in this experiment. While, on the surface, appeals to neutrality and consensus might seem essential to situating Wikipedia within the canon of great encyclopedias across history, the remarkable historicity of these concepts themselves point to a need for greater reflexivity.

Every great encyclopedia since the age of the Enlightenment had some form of claim to being objective, unbiased and neutral. At the very least, they claimed to contain the truth on the nature of things. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can observe the malleable nature of these definitions and frames. In this article, I have aimed to argue that we should be equally reflexive on the constructed nature of neutrality and the inherently political nature of consensus. As Peake (2015) pointed out, we should not be blind to the possibility that "the use of policies to 'rule with reason', is in essence a façade for maintaining a misogynist infopolitics fundamentally opposed to information threatening to male privilege both on and beyond Wikipedia - regardless of how well-sourced."

The events surrounding the GamerGate controversy has arguably brought out the most destructive and regressive aspects of the culture surrounding video games. However, as numerous women try to rebuild their lives, members of the industry, the press and the progressive parts of the community are hoping that the despicable events of 2015 will lead to a reformed culture that is more inclusive, welcoming and diverse.

As a constant battleground for similar debates across our culture, Wikipedia appears to have lost in the eyes of the population that it desperately tries to attract. As I have proposed in this article, what does the quest for neutrality (as it is currently defined) make invisible? What does the drive to achieve consensus as practiced today enable and incentivize?

My aim is not to call for an abandonment of the very foundations of the encyclopedia or to re-examine how it creates knowledge and constructs authorship. Rather, this article is a reminder to be ever vigilant about the power dynamics that play into this consen-

sus and to be aware of its unintended consequences. So far, in almost fifteen years, the community of editors that have contributed to Wikipedia have managed to build the most comprehensive encyclopedia ever; and yet, the outside perception of that community utterly fails to attract the very people it needs to sustain itself. A failure to address the gender gap in the past four years, along with the recent dramatic events surrounding GamerGate Controversy, has shown that any technical innovation or social outreach has to be accompanied by a re-examination of the culture and how that culture is enabled and reinforced. Given that the number of dedicated editors diminishes every year, this might be a challenge of critical importance.

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