

TRIBUNE

20 years of the encyclopaedia anyone can edit: Wikipedia and the pursuit of knowledge equity



María Sefidari

María Sefidari Huici is a teacher in the Master's Degree in Digital Communication, Culture and Citizenship at Rey Juan Carlos University in MediaLab-Prado.

Born in Madrid, Spain, where she still lives, María Sefidari graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from the Complutense University of Madrid and then studied a Master in Administration and Tourism at the Faculty of Business of the same University. She was named Techweek Women's Leadership Fellow 2014, which showcases, celebrates and supports emerging female leaders in business and technology.

María Sefidari began collaborating on Wikimedia projects in 2006, since then she has participated with different roles in the Wikimedia movement. María Sefidari was one of the founders of Wikimedia Spain and the Wikiwomen Users Group; she also created the WikiProject LGBT Spanish Wikipedia. She has worked on different Wikimedia governance committees including the Wikimedia Affiliations and Individual Commitment Grants. During her time on the Affiliations Committee, María Sefidari was the Treasurer of the committee, effectively overseeing and monitoring the committee's budget expenditure. From 2013 to 2015, she was also a board member of the Wikimedia Foundation.

María Sefidari rejoined the Wikimedia Foundation Board in 2016 to fill a community nomination vacancy and was reconfirmed for a second term in August 2017.

In her free time, María Sefidari travels around the world, organizes wiki-workshops to involve new editors and supports Real Madrid Football Club.

maria.sefidari@urjc.es

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8797-2501>

Received: 01/12/2021

Accepted: 01/12/2021

Recommended citation

Sefidari, María (2021, December). "20 years of the encyclopaedia anyone can edit: wikipedia and the pursuit of knowledge equity". *BiD: textos universitaris de biblioteconomia i documentació*, no. 47 (December). <<https://bid.ub.edu/en/47/sefidari.htm>>.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1344/BiD2021.47.03> [Accessed: dd-mm-aa].



The texts published in this journal are – unless otherwise indicated – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 4.0 International licence. The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Keywords

knowledge creation; knowledge production; information commons; gender gap; knowledge gaps; knowledge equity; disinformation; Wikipedia; Wikimedia 2030

When referring to collaborative knowledge creation, sharing and curation, Wikipedia stands out as the benchmark. On January 15, 2021 Wikipedia celebrated its 20th anniversary. There are many good things to say about Wikipedia: it has successfully demonstrated that ordinary people, and not just academic elites, can build and produce knowledge – and useful knowledge at that, if we take into account that Wikipedia is consistently one of the top 10 most visited webs on the internet, with more than 20 billion monthly pageviews (*Wikimedia statistics*, 2021). People don't have to pay for the content, it is ad-free and independent, hosted by a non-profit organization – the Wikimedia Foundation – that mostly relies on small donations from individuals around the world. It is a unique model – free knowledge by the people for the people – that has held true for two decades by valiantly pursuing an aspirational vision: a world where everyone can have access to the sum of all knowledge.

For all that Wikipedia broke pre-existing assumptions about how knowledge could be created and shared, it still has some ways to go to achieve the promise of its grand vision of a world in which all people can share in the sum of all knowledge. While the usual gatekeeping found in traditional knowledge production fora is not immediately visible, the reality is that only a very small percentage of Wikipedia contributors are women (Wikimedia Foundation, 2011). Women are half the human race – it is utopic to aspire to collect the sum of all knowledge if there are still barriers that significantly stop half of humanity from participating in the co-creation of all knowledge.

It is also worth questioning how we define "open" projects when they remain difficult to access to women and other groups that have historically been precluded from writing history, and have even been erased from it. For example, over its existence Wikipedia has remarkably remained very conservative on how it defines reliable knowledge. Contributors continue to adhere to Western-centric forms of knowledge, particularly published works, which does not invite knowledge that has historically been shared orally, and still today there are indigenous peoples who share it this way. It also excludes content related to topics that have been historically invisibilized – women, LGBT+ people, marginalised communities, coloured people – and for which, consequently, there are very few reliable sources published on them.

Very few accommodations are made in these cases, a surprising lack of innovative will and historical perspective that results in this type of content often being disputed or deleted, perpetuating bias. Less than 20% of biographies in English Wikipedia are about women (Johnson *et al.*, 2020). As Ford and Wajcman (2017) write, Wikipedia's infrastructure reinforces existing power relations by reaffirming the already legitimated power of scientists and academic professionals on Wikipedia, and also introduces new, unequal power relations among editors who do not share the same levels of expertise and access to what are considered credible knowledge sources.

There is an urgency to address this situation. Research has shown that the content on Wikipedia informs those who read Wikipedia. Johnson *et al.* (2020) found that there is also a readership gap in Wikipedia, with women reading Wikipedia less than men. In their study, women showed more interest in topics such as biographies of women or medicine, and so content gaps, low quality articles or clear bias would have an "outsized impact" on women readers. They conclude that when women do not derive the same value from Wikipedia than men, they read it less, and they are less likely to become contributors, reinforcing the existing content gaps due to self-focus bias.

Given these challenges, what will the future of Wikipedia look like? The Wikimedia Movement (2017) has developed a 2030 Movement Strategy to answer this question by addressing the most persistent challenges on Wikipedia. This Movement Strategy centres on **knowledge equity** precisely to focus on "the knowledge and communities that have been left out by structures of power and privilege". The creation of this Movement Strategy, initiated at the time of Wikipedia's 15th anniversary, was an example itself of how people from different countries and backgrounds came together to examine the distance between Wikipedia's current role as "the encyclopaedia anyone can edit" and its aspirational vision of "a world in which every single person can freely share in the sum of all knowledge". It was a Wikipedia-style global collaborative effort, with more than 200 events around the world, including 2,000 community members from 50 countries working together in over 20 languages (Dhapola, 2021). The resulting recommendations (Meta contributors, 2021) propose structural and systemic changes in the Wikimedia movement to shape the future of collaborative knowledge creation and sharing, with the ambition of becoming "the essential infrastructure of the ecosystem of free knowledge". This is a timely effort in an era where disinformation is on the rise (Martens *et al.*, 2018), with populations unable to distinguish fact from fiction and therefore potentially more susceptible to manipulation. In this context, Wikipedia has the potential to become a guiding light to others, in how to ensure that knowledge is inclusive, comprehensive and trustworthy; and how to identify threats to these efforts and correct them.

Bibliography

- Dhapola, Shruti (2021). "Wikipedia has a new 'Universal Code of Conduct' to deal with harassment, misinformation". *The Indian Express* (November). <<https://indianexpress.com/article/technology/tech-news-technology/wikipedia-new-universal-code-of-conduct-to-deal-with-harassment-misinformation-7175980/>>. [Accessed: 29/03/2021].
- Wikimedia statistics* (2021). "Monthly overview". Wikimedia. <<https://stats.wikimedia.org/#/all-wikipedia-projects>>.
- Ford, Heather; Wajcman, Judy (2017). "Anyone can edit', not everyone does: Wikipedia's infrastructure and the gender gap". *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 47 (March), no. 4, p. 511–527. <10.1177/0306312717692172>.
- Johnson, Isaac; Lemmerich, Florian; Saez-Trumper, Diego; West, Robert; Strohmaier, Markus; Zia, Leila (2020). *Global gender differences in Wikipedia readership*. Cornell University. <arXiv:2007.10403>. [Accessed: 29/03/2021].
- Martens, B.; Aguiar, L., Gomez-Herrera, E.; Mueller-Langer, F. (2018). "The Digital Transformation of News Media and the Rise of Disinformation and Fake News". *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <10.2139/ssrn.3164170>.
- Meta Contributors* (n.d.). "Strategy/Wikimedia movement/2018-20/Recommendations". *Meta, discussion about Wikimedia projects*. Wikimedia. <https://meta.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Strategy/Wikimedia_movement/2018-20/Recommendations&oldid=21125175>. [Accessed: 29/03/2021].
- Movement, W. (2017). "2030 Wikimedia Movement Strategy". Wikimedia. <https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Strategy/Wikimedia_movement/2017/Direction#Our_strategic_direction:_Service_and_Equity>.
- Strategy/Wikimedia Movement/2018-20/Recommendations (2021, February). *Meta, discussion about Wikimedia projects*. Wikimedia. <https://meta.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=Strategy/Wikimedia_movement/2018-20/Recommendations&oldid=21125175>. [Accessed: 29/03/2021].
- Wikimedia Foundation* (2011). *Wikipedia editors survey*. Wikimedia. [Accessed: 29/03/2021].