Book Review: *Wikipedia and the Representation of Reality*, by Zachary J. McDowell and Matthew A. Vetter, Routledge, 2022

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Many readers will stumble over the title of this work. The phrase "the representation of reality" reads as either inscrutably inarticulate or hopelessly grand. After all, how can a 122-page volume hope to define "reality," much less say anything comprehensive about it?

As it turns out, the title of this work states the challenge of its premise quite well. The inner workings of Wikipedia have been examined before, but rarely with the sense of insight and compassion that McDowell and Vetter provide. This short volume, written by two educators and researchers with combined decades of experience teaching with Wikipedia, is informed by a wide-ranging theoretical grounding, an insider's perspective of the arcane rules and practices of the online community, and a compassionate understanding of the humans within and outside the platform. The title sets up the consequences for this work, as it will demonstrate that nothing less than our shared "representation of reality" is at stake in the work of Wikipedia.

How Wikipedia constructs a reality through the prism of a collaborative online community, while simultaneously defining and being defined by a print-based understanding of "knowledge," is the tension running throughout this work (and, indeed, the site itself). Readers will encounter a volume organized in to five main chapters, each examining how a set of essential Wikipedia policies – and their combined practices – predict the outcome of how Wikipedia will represent reality.

Right from the preface, these authors start the work of showing how the many contradictions in Wikipedia's rules and norms challenge the idea of inclusive participation in editing. The seemingly straightforward imperative "Be bold!" (part of the fifth pillar, "Wikipedia has no firm rules") requires layers of privilege and confidence. As the authors explain:

> ["Be bold!"] helped us recognize that many of Wikipedia's inclusion issues lie in historical gendered systems that must be unfurled in their own right – Wikipedia is obviously a piece of this early internet utopianism and remains plagued by numerous masculinist ideals about participation. While many of the policies and guidelines of Wikipedia, particularly "Be Bold," remain well-intentioned, they were conceptualized without a greater understanding of how to be actively (rather than passively) inclusive of diverse participation and ideas. (p. 12)

"Be bold" is but one example of Wikipedia's ideals expressed in the pillars, or its founding principles, that are explored more deeply in the first chapter. The authors demonstrate how these organizing principles, seemingly neutral in their creation, are in fact products of an early internet age of utopian techno-rhetoric, full of biases that all but guarantee the conflicts, meanderings, and shortcomings that the project now endures. As the authors phrase it most succinctly: "The encyclopedia that 'anyone can edit,' as it turns out, is mostly edited by male contributors" (p. 9).

The second chapter offers an evenhanded discussion of the policies of reliability and verifiability, portrays how the community implements them, and investigates their consequences, both intended and un-intended. The authors argue that not only does the academy need to pivot from outdated criticisms of Wikipedia, but it also needs to

recognize and teach engagement with Wikipedia as a fundamentally sound approach to producing and managing reliable, credible, and neutral information on the Web. McDowell and Vetter offer that Wikipedia creates an "ethical assemblage" of policies – the process by which the construction of reliability occurs. The authors point out the limitations of this "ethical assemblage" when they discuss print bias in the section 'Print Culture as exclusionary epistemology":

> Wikipedia's adherence to print culture has allowed the community to develop effective policies for reliability, but also prevents it from accomplishing its encyclopedic goal of becoming a global human knowledge source. More specifically, the emphasis on verifiable print sources plays a significant role in the marginalization of indigenous knowledge cultures, especially when their knowledge is stored and transmitted orally. (p. 38)

These are valuable insights. Although the presence of Native American and other indigenous cultures in Wikipedias has been discussed elsewhere as mainly a method for preserving indigenous languages, here the authors are pointing up a more serious and systemic limitation for the vision statement of the editing community. Wikipedia is not an encyclopedia, or not if rigidly compared to the historic print encyclopedias such as *World Book* or *Britannica*. It may proclaim itself to be an encyclopedia, but no traditional encyclopedia ever attempted to capture the currency of being freely-accessible global knowledge database written by volunteers (with apologies to the many editors of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*). However, there is also no concept more closely aligned to Wikipedia than print encyclopedias. In order to understand a new phenomenon, we are likely to apply a familiar concept first. And in the case of Wikipedia, comprehending it through the paradigm of a print encyclopedia blinds us all sorts of problems and potentials. The authors are pointing to only one of those problems when they remind us, painfully, that even if Wikipedia succeeds on its own terms, those terms are often the wrong ones. The only good news here, as McDowell and Vetter demonstrate more fully in the last chapter, is that Wikipedia is a regenerating and perpetual community, capable of rewriting its own rules to respond in the future to the limitations of its print culture legacy.

In their third chapter the authors examine how Wikipedia determines what counts as knowledge. They are wise to turn their discussion toward some of the more recent human stories of Wikipedia's exclusionary practices, including the case of Clarice Phelps. As McDowell and Vetter explain, Phelps is noted as the first African-American woman to help discover a chemical element. Her Wikipedia page was nominated for deletion on the grounds that her career did not meet the notability standards. The real service that McDowell and Vetter deliver in this discussion, however, it not simple outrage or disbelief. Instead the authors clearly explain to their readers how Wikipedia's policies not only allowed for a spurious nomination for deletion to be considered credibly, but they also share with the reader how the messy and time-consuming work of consensus building to keep Phelps' page drains energy and enthusiasm from the volunteer editing community. Again, as the authors remind us, these are systemic biases created by the (overly-white, overly-male, overly English-speaking) editing community when they explain how Wikipedia amplifies and funnels biases of our cultures on to the platform.

Likewise, in their fourth chapter, the writers keep their focus on the people who contribute to Wikipedia, and how policies that are seemingly designed to help the online encyclopedia function for all, actually ensure the maximum amount of struggle for onboarding newcomers. There are legitimate reasons for Wikipedia to have "exclusionary" policies, when they apply to selecting information to appear on the platform. After all, Wikipedia cannot be all things to all people. However, once exclusionary policies are created for content, they prepare the way for exclusionary policies to be applied to people. Summarizing a significant amount of research across a range of sources, the authors detail how exclusion of people falls in to three main categories of behaviors: "gender (and race) based harassment, extra labor, and gatekeeping newcomers" (p. 74). Here the authors detail the struggles that new editors face through "gatekeeping" behaviors from more seasoned editors and even overt harassment. The target for these behaviors are people who are venturing in to a strange new environment to share a passion for a specific topic. As the authors succinctly put it, "[for newcomers finding] and carving out additional and new spaces, boundary work, and identity work are all extra efforts, emotional labor, and hoops to jump through *just to give their time away for free* (emphasis in the original)" (78). McDowell and Vetter also highlight meaningful programs and instances where the community works against these negative behaviors, creating a vision of this global community as constantly evolving and iterating to improve its work.

It is not all bad news for Wikipedia in the hands of McDowell and Vetter. In their final chapter, the authors point the pivotal role the site in combatting fake news and establishing how a community of users can agree

on facts and norms. Here Wikipedia is contrasted with social media sites like Facebook and Twitter in not only agreeing on policy for warding off mis- and disinformation, but on the basis of the fact that Wikipedia remains a non-profit. The authors introduce us to the concept of surveillance capitalism as a contrast. Lastly, the authors point to ways that the Wikipedia community is working to improve the problems of representation, detailed in earlier chapters, and examine the dynamic of Wikipedia as a continually evolving organization. With this last fact, the authors gesture to the possibility of a more meaningful future for Wikipedia.

Wikipedia scholarship of note to the *Computers and Composition* community generally takes two tracks: projects that attempt to define, interpret, and contextualize Wikipedia and the community that edits it, as opposed to works that think more deeply about how writers work within and beyond its orbit. From early works like Andrew Lih's *The Wikipedia Revolution: How a Bunch of Nobodies Created the World's Greatest Encyclopedia* (Lih, 2009) and to the more recent *Wikipedia @ 20: Stories of an Incomplete Revolution*(Reagle and Koerner, 2020)*,* this first category of works to better define the phenomenon of Wikipedia. The second category of Wikipedia scholarship looks more closely at Wikipedia and its relationship to education, and often classroom projects specifically. McDowell and Vetter are seasoned scholars with deep experience in both teaching with Wikipedia and analyzing its complex relationships in higher education, and Wikipedia and the Representation of Reality plays to both tracks. This volume will be of particular interest to readers of *Computers and Composition* both for its accessible explication of the complexities of the Wikipedia community, as well as its theoretical contextualization for the online encyclopedia. Even many Wikipedia insiders do not understand all of the distinctions and functions within the Wikipedia bureaucracy. The authors provide all readers with valuable explanations by identifying many of those roles, explaining their functions, and then discussing how those roles impact the goals of the project. As they do so, they weave in strands of applicable theory, pulling from Benkler's Commons-based Peer Production (Benkler, 2002) and Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1982) particularly. Although the scholarship of teaching with Wikipedia has seen a two-decade drumbeat of field reports from educators who seem to have "discovered" Wikipedia, these authors avoid that trope. McDowell and Vetter's work remains both accessible those curious to learn more about Wikipedia and informative to veterans of edit wars.

The overall importance of this work cannot be underestimated. Too much is at stake for us to continue to view Wikipedia as a curious hobby for dilettante librarians. Indeed, as their title suggests, our very grasp on reality is at stake. McDowell and Vetter help readers to understand that the famously sexist, misanthropic, bullying, and petty behaviors of some Wikipedia editors are not inconsequential and isolated bad behaviors, or examples of how generic online interactions can filter out everything but the worst in people, but they are in fact the logical products of how these Wikimedia communities were created. Yes, Wikipedia is a reflection of our own cultures' biases. But the analysis of *Wikipedia and the Representation of Reality* clearly demonstrates, too much is at stake for us to ignore these problems. The next time you conduct a Google search, or hear Alexa's voice, or encounter *any* type of online representation of knowledge, we would all be wise to remember this work, and pause to think of the flawed, biased, and evolving collaboration that produced it.

Declaration of Competing Interest

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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