NAVIGATING BIAS: GENDER AND INTERSECTIONAL INSIGHTS INTO WIKIPEDIA'S FRONT PAGE THROUGH GATEKEEPING AND AGENDA-SETTING FRAMEWORKS

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Abstract

This research examines the "Main Page" section of the Spanish, English and Catalan editions of Wikipedia from the communication theories of gatekeeping and agenda-setting, coupled with a feminist and intersectional perspective. Our methodology is based on a scoping review around gatekeeping, agenda-setting and Wikipedia and 13 semi-structured individual interviews with volunteer Wikipedia editors. Prospective results show that there are no concrete steps taken to address the gender gap on Wikipedia's Main page.

Keywords: Wikipedia gender gap, affirmative action, gatekeeping, agenda-setting, interviews.

Introduction

The gender gap in Wikipedia is a widely documented problem both in terms of participation –volunteers editing on the platform– and content –representation of women and other non-normative gender identities' biographies (Bear and Collier 2016, Ferran-Ferrer et al. 2023, Minguillón et al. 2021). A relevant space in Wikipedia where the gender gap is an observable phenomenon is the so-called Main Page. The Main Page, which we will refer to as the front page of Wikipedia is the home page, the most visited page of this digital encyclopedia and whose contents have a wide reach as the most popular video on YouTube or a common search on Google.

Previous research indicates that gender, colonial/cultural and other intersectional biases abound in the front pages of the various Wikipedia editions and that the most visible biographies are those of cisgender men and white, European, and North American individuals (Sefidari-Huici 2022).

Methods

As part of the research project "Women and Wikipedia (W&W)", we have focused our investigation of the gender gap in this section of the English, Spanish and Catalan Wikipedia from the communication theories of gatekeeping (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009) and agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The gatekeeping and agenda-setting theories allow us to analyze communicative phenomena in Wikipedia by looking at issues like the power of the agents involved in the construction and dissemination of information and the organization, preeminence or omission of the issues considered to deserve front page attention. In line with previous literature, Wikipedia functions not only as an encyclopedia but also as a new media (Lee, 2018; Bürger et al, 2023; Ren & Xu, 2023). We have coupled this analysis with a feminist and intersectional perspective in media studies, "one that accounts for the complexity of lived experience and addresses the interconnected and inseparable character of oppression based on gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ability, religion, nationality, and other social stratifications" (Harvey 2020).

Methodologically, we first carried out a scoping review–a systematized literature review– (Arksey and O'Malley 2005) in Web of Science and Scopus databases to map previous work analyzing Wikipedia from these communication theories. Second, we conducted 13 semi-structured personal interviews with volunteers from the English, Spanish and Catalan Wikipedia editions who were in charge of editing the front page or who have been involved with this section of Wikipedia. Our main aim was to learn about the functioning of this section from their first-hand experiences in editing and programming it. We were also interested in the different sections and subsections of the front page, and the motivations, organizational dynamics, and perception of content gaps in Wikipedia by the volunteer editors. Third, we transcribed the interviews and coded them using the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti.

Results

Prospective results suggest that, despite the open and collective nature of Wikipedia, a large part of the volunteers interviewed do not consider the gender/content gap to be addressed through the front page, but at most the gap of the front page would be the result of the existing gap, as a mirror of current patriarchal society.

The interviews reveal that the topics displayed on the front page, while part of the volunteer community's content, ultimately respond to the subjective decisions of the individuals taking administrator roles. Tacitly, these administrators prioritize their own topic preferences and interests. Despite the Wikimedia Movement, which includes the Wikimedia Foundation and all the language and territory-based affiliates, agreed on a new strategic direction towards the 2030 horizon, which sets the goal to eradicate the gender gap and prioritize underrepresented groups, there are no concrete steps taken to address these on the Wikipedia's Main page. On the contrary, within the volunteer community, emphasizing gender and intersectional concerns tends to be perceived as an activist topic, posing challenges in achieving a consensus. Consequently, the gender and intersectional gaps are mainly addressed through the committed impulse of individual feminist and LGBTIQ+ activist Wiki-projects and editorial collectives.

Discussion/Conclusions

The Wikipedia Main Page emerges as an online space of contestation on gender and intersectional representation, therefore requesting urgent academic attention.

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