

Researchers reveal Wikipedia gender biases

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Computer science researchers in the University of Minnesota's College of Science and Engineering are leading a team that has confirmed a substantial gender gap among editors of Wikipedia and a corresponding gender-oriented disparity in the content. The team's research will be presented at the 2011 WikiSym conference, the seventh annual International Symposium on Wikis and Open Collaboration, in California this fall.

Over the past decade, Wikipedia has become a premier online information resource. About 400 million people around the world visit Wikipedia on the web every month. Remarkably, Wikipedia was not built by experts, but instead harnesses the collective efforts of millions of volunteer [editors](#).

"Anecdotal information suggested that the smaller number of female editors may have led to a deficiency in Wikipedia's coverage of topics of particular interest to females," said lead researcher and computer science doctoral student Shyong (Tony) Lam. "A January 2011 New York Times article pointed out that Wikipedia's coverage of topics like friendship bracelets or 'Sex and the City' pales in comparison to that of toy soldiers or 'The Sopranos.' We wanted to do the research to see if this [disparity](#) was carried throughout Wikipedia."

In their research paper, "WP:Clubhouse? An Exploration of Wikipedia's Gender Imbalance," the researchers from the University of Minnesota's GroupLens Research Lab present a [scientific exploration](#) of gender imbalance in the English Wikipedia's population of editors. Using self-

reported gender information from more than 110,000 editors over a period of time from 2005 to January 2011, the researchers explored three broad areas related to the gender gap.

First, they looked at the nature of the imbalance itself. Their research showed that only 16 percent of new editors joining Wikipedia during 2009 identified themselves as female, and those females made only 9 percent of the edits by the editors who joined in 2009. To make matters worse, female editors are more likely to stop editing and leave Wikipedia when their edits are reverted as newcomers.

In contrast, the gender gap has nearly disappeared in other areas of social media – or has even reversed. Females now outnumber males on Facebook and Twitter. Despite this trend, the researchers found that Wikipedia's gender gap has shown no sign of closing over the past five years.

"We were stunned to see such a significant gender gap in Wikipedia," said John Riedl, a professor in the University of Minnesota's Department of [Computer Science](#) and Engineering and a member of the research team. "As Wikipedia continues to be a critical information resource, it is important that all voices be heard. We feel that understanding the challenges caused by Wikipedia's sizable gender gap can be a first step to finding ways to broaden participation."

In the second focus area, the researchers involved in the study focused on the effects of the gender imbalance on Wikipedia. The researchers found that Wikipedia articles about topics of particular interest to female editors are significantly shorter than "male" articles. Furthermore, they found that Wikipedia's coverage of movies with female-skewed audiences is lower quality than its coverage of male-skewed movies. Overall, Wikipedia seems to be growing in a way that is biased toward topics of interest to males.

Another way the gender gap affects Wikipedia is that females seem to be particularly engaged in the community-building activities on the site. For instance, the researchers' analysis shows that of editors who have substantial levels of editing experience, females are significantly more likely than males to become administrators. The researchers believe that addressing the gender gap is a way for Wikipedia to meet its increasing needs for leadership.

Third, the researchers analyzed the role of gender in conflict among Wikipedia's editors. The research indicates that the articles females tend to edit are twice as likely to be about controversial or contentious topics. In addition, female editors are significantly more likely to have their early contributions undone by their fellow editors, and are more likely to be indefinitely blocked by fellow editors. Taken together, these findings hint at a culture that may be resistant to female participation.

"We expected to find that females would avoid conflict, but to our surprise we found just the opposite," Riedl said. "We're not sure exactly what this means, but it may give us more insights into the [Wikipedia](#) culture that could be one of the contributing factors to the [gender gap](#)."

More information: To read the entire research paper, visit www.grouplens.org/node/466

Provided by University of Minnesota

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