

# The Heart Work of Wikipedia: Gendered, Emotional Labor in the World's Largest Online Encyclopedia

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## ABSTRACT

This note explores the issue of women's participation in Wikipedia through the lens of emotional labor. Using a grounded theory approach, we detail the kinds of tasks women Wikipedians choose to do and explore why they choose the work they do. We also explore the emotional costs of their labor and their strategies for coping. Our analysis of 20 interviews leads us to posit that the gendered and emotional labor required of many women to participate in Wikipedia's production renders it, problematically, a space of conflicting public and private spheres, motivated by antithetical open and closed values. In addition to other contributions, we believe this insight sheds light on some of the complex dynamics behind Wikipedia's observed gender gap.

## Author Keywords

Wikipedia; Women; Gender Gap; Emotional Labor

## ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.3. Organizational Impacts: Computer-supported collaborative work

## INTRODUCTION

Wikipedia, perhaps the most successful large-scale, online collaboration in the world, is a storied space of democratic values and meritocracy in action—as many within the CHI and CSCW communities have extensively detailed [e.g., 13,18,19,22,23,24]. Yet underneath its idealized veneer, Wikipedia in practice proves to have a notable gender gap. Unlike user distribution reports on social media platforms, which trend more toward representative parity or even a greater number of female users [7], surveys of Wikipedia users indicate the overwhelming majority of contributors are male [14]. Both the popular media [e.g., 9,21,27] and scholars [e.g., 1,6,20] have begun to explore Wikipedia's participation disparities, raising questions about editor recruitment and retention, content coverage and bias, and the tension between diversity and territoriality [10]. Recently, Jimmy Wales, co-founder of Wikipedia, admitted that the Wikimedia Foundation (WMF) has “completely failed” [29] to meet its goal of increasing the number of female participants to 25% by 2015.

In February 2011 in response to an article published in *The New York Times* [5], then Executive Director of WMF, Sue Gardner, asked her Deputy Director Erik Möller to create the Gendergap mailing list, a publicly archived listserv

“provided by the Wikimedia Foundation as a communication tool to collectively address the realities of the gender gap” [28]. In September 2014, a male Wikipedian posted the following message to the list: “I think there should be a separate site for the gender gap effort [...] where women and men interested in narrowing the gender gap and documenting the existing problems can exchange views in an atmosphere undisturbed by men pretending to be women, men opposed to narrowing the gender gap, men arguing that it's not really proven that the gender gap is a problem.” Even within a dedicated listserv, the topic of gender parity proves to be volatile. Lam et al. [20] confirm this social complexity, noting a “culture that may be resistant to female participation” [20:9].

However, Wikipedia's gender gap is typically framed as a “woman problem” [8]. It has been attributed to women's lack of discretionary time [6], sensitivity to conflict and criticism [6], desire to be more social [21], and hesitancy to learn technical skills such as the Wiki mark-up language [11]. In August 2014, Wikimedia Deutschland published a diversity report indicating that, although the picture is complex, “lack of time, technical usability barriers (e.g. navigation, editability), and a variety of sociocultural and communication issues (style of communication, working atmosphere) can [...] definitely be identified as reasons for low female participation in Wikipedia” [4].

Despite the perception of the gender gap as a “woman problem,” women *do* actively contribute to different language Wikipedias across the world. Women lead local chapters, sustain sister projects, and work for and chair the WMF. Women who have similar edit counts to men are more likely to become administrators [21] and make more sizeable revisions [1] than men do. This note reports early findings that suggest there is something to be learned about the possible cause(s) and consequences of Wikipedia's gender gap by looking more closely at the experiences of women actively engaged in the community. What are their experiences like? What challenges do they face? How do they persevere? We posit that many women Wikipedians engage in a form of ‘emotion work’ [15], also known as emotional labor, that allows them to maintain their participation even as the circumstances in which they engage prove challenging, if not caustic.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws on the growing awareness among HCI scholars of the need for more nuanced considerations of gender and the careful application of feminist theories in sociotechnical research [e.g., 2,3,16,17,26]. Here we attend particularly to issues of agency, empowerment, and fulfillment [2:1301], drawing on Hochschild's construction of 'emotion work' to identify aspects of Wikipedian participation that might otherwise go unremarked.

### Emotion Work

Hochschild [15] defines emotion work as "the act of trying to change in a degree or quality an emotion or feeling...[it is] the effort—the act of trying—and not the outcome, which may or may not be successful [...] 'emotion work' refers more broadly to the act of evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing, feeling in oneself" [15:561]. This work is *deep acting*, meaning one tries to alter both the display as well as the originating emotion itself to rectify one's own emotion to the perceived appropriate emotion for the situation. This act of emotional alignment is oriented to a situation's 'feeling rules.' By contrast, the management of one's behavioral expression(s) alone (i.e., controlling what others see) is *surface acting*, which draws on Goffman's dramaturgical notion of the presentation of self.

Like Goffman, Hochschild's construction of emotional labor was conceived with the assumption that interactions take place face-to-face or, at minimum, voice-to-voice. Nevertheless, we believe participation in many of today's sociotechnical environments may also involve forms of emotional labor. Despite their digital nature, online spaces such as Wikipedia engage individuals as whole selves, not only intellectually but also emotionally. By way of edit logs, talk pages, and other digital traces, Wikipedians can engage simultaneously in both surface as well deep acting. Using the lens of emotional labor allows us to better tease apart how Wikipedia's gender gap may relate to prevailing feeling rules or participation strategies; at the same time this work contributes to advancing Hochschild's theory of emotion work for understanding mediated social situations.

### METHODOLOGY

This work is part of a larger qualitative project that seeks to understand the participation experiences of Wikipedia editors who self-identify as women.<sup>1</sup> Participants were recruited via a variety of methods, including utilizing the Gendergap mailing list. Selection criteria were twofold: (1) self-identified as a woman, (2) had been editing the English language (EN) Wikipedia for two or more years. (Of the 20 participants interviewed, 15 have edited the EN Wikipedia for 7 or more years.) Study participants ranged in age from

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<sup>1</sup> Our theoretical lens was applied *post hoc* to our collected data. This study never set out to explore the phenomenon of emotional labor in Wikipedia, which we acknowledge as a subject inclusive of all genders.

19 to late 60s and derived from the following countries: Australia (1); France (1); Germany (2); India (2); Spain (1); and the United States (13). These women represent a range of gender identities, sexual orientations, life stages, and relationship statuses. The total number of EN live edits for all participants ranges from 112 to 122,828 per user<sup>2</sup>, and their user permissions include a wide range of system privileges.

Here we use grounded theory [12] to analyze a set of 20 interviews conducted by the first author between January–July 2014. Each interview was conducted as a semi-structured conversation using instant message (2), email (2), or video conferencing applications (16). No interviews were conducted in person, and all interviews were conducted in English, audio recorded, and transcribed. Participants were invited to review their transcripts and elaborate on their comments post-interview.

### FINDINGS

Data analysis revealed three themes related to emotional labor in the collective interviews. Together, these themes provide a glimpse into the strategic work women engage in to adjust their actions and/or feelings to sustain their participation in Wikipedia.

#### Surface Acting Around Choice and Timing of Work

One key way participants engage in surface acting involves exhibiting agency over what kinds of work they do. Many interviewees stop or avoid certain kinds of work because it involves too much "drama." For example, one woman noted that she doesn't experience trolling or harassment because she "actively avoid[s] areas or tasks" she thinks are "stressful" (P12). Similarly, P1 explains why she chooses not to participate on talk pages for controversial articles:

*Women are marginalized in Wikipedia because [there are] so few of us. I don't participate in those discussions because I just—that is too much emotional work for me. I have plenty of emotional work to do in real life. [...] I think a lot of other women make the same judgment because it's really awful. I hate arguing with people on the Internet. [...] I avoid any kind of drama on Wikipedia because I don't have the energy to deal with it.*

Interviewees also manage their participation by controlling when they choose to be active. Eight women reported they have taken at least one Wikibreak (e.g., a break from reading, editing, and contributing to Wikipedia) and 2 women switched to a different project. P5 notes, "I didn't ever completely quit, but I did make a deliberate effort to change what I was doing so that I would not have to be faced with seeing really, really disturbing things that people were writing." All 10 of these women say their decision to stop or change their work was the direct result of Wikistress (e.g., stress caused by editing Wikipedia, specifically

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<sup>2</sup> Edit counts in Wikipedia EN as of 19 September 2014.

involving conflict, vandals, trolls, edit wars, and/or incivility); six say their Wikistress was caused by gender-based hostility.

### **Deep Acting and Gendered Feeling Rules**

Participants' *deep acting* emotion work was primarily connected to stories of conflict, being targeted by trolls, or receiving unwanted sexual advances. At these moments, there was common recognition among interviewees that they should "stop behaving like a woman," which reveals the existence of a gendered 'feeling rule' in Wikipedia. P2 articulates the dimensions of this rule,

*If you're harassed, there's an expectation that you will behave like a saint. You cannot give into any of the provocation [...] If you manage to successfully deal with the harasser [...] you cannot talk about [your] success. Because in talking about success stories dealing with women's harassment on Wikipedia, you empower the harassers. And that's the view that's being consistently said again and again and again . . . The only acceptable model for behavior on Wikipedia is to behave like a man, which is to ignore all the bullshit.*

Similarly, P9 says, "[There was] one time that my sex was used against me in a way that did hurt me. I would appreciate it if you didn't [share the details] because I don't like to show weakness. We have a term for that on Wikipedia. We call it beans."

### **Emotional Labor, Ideological Gain**

According to Hochschild, when people engage in emotion work they do so because they value social participation more than their personal feelings of conflict or despair. This equation expressed itself in our interviews as ideological gain. Despite stories of conflict, trolling, and harassment, participants valorized Wikipedia and the effort they put in to be editors. According to P1, "[Wikipedia] is the way I can reach the most people, and it means a lot to me to have a voice." Other participants note feelings of fulfillment generated by being *productively involved*: "I got this feedback from actual people, who really wanted to learn about the things I knew about" (P7); "I feel so much more connected to my local place [...] I've suddenly got a reputation as a local historian" (P8); "I'm really happy there are articles there because I started them [...] I'm also always really happy when I find a source for something that justifies keeping an article" (P15). Deep acting (or adhering to and accepting the 'feeling rules' of the dominant culture) is the mechanism by which our interviewees authentically engage with the values of Wikipedia (e.g., free knowledge for all, written by anyone and presented from a neutral point of view). Notably, this need for alignment appears to be so fine-tuned in our subjects that it no longer seems discordant to them.

## **DISCUSSION**

Wikipedia is a fluid community, intentionally pushing and crossing boundaries in both formal and semi-structured

ways. However, our data suggest that many participants' experiences in the community are shaped by others' perceptions of and responses to their gender. This not only affects participants' choice and timing of work in unintended and unstructured ways—and other community members' responses in turn—but also their engagement with other Wikipedians, friends, partners, and children. If participating in this sociotechnical space requires people of any gender to engage in taxing emotional labor, then it is time to change the collective perception of Wikipedia as a neutral, if not democratic, environment.

Some of the participants interviewed for this study may be acting as proverbial canaries in the coal mine, their emotion work signaling a pernicious environment within Wikipedia. If women who adhere to the underlying mission and epistemology of Wikipedia must engage in forms of deep and surface acting to participate as editors, administrators, and WMF employees, then what does it cost other individuals to conform to the Wiki way [25]? Should emotional labor be considered the cost of enabling such a socially complex project? Moreover, are Wikipedians victimizing themselves by institutionalizing biased 'feeling rules'? As one example, perhaps it is time that policies, guidelines, and essays such as "Assume good faith," "Deny recognition" (redirected from "Don't feed the trolls") and "Don't stuff beans up your nose" be critically interrogated for their normalization of raised—rather than lowered—barriers to full participation.

This brief exposure of women's experiences as editors suggests that the Wikipedia community must decide the gender gap is, first, a problem and, second, a problem worth addressing. Bridging the gap will require more than an increase in female participation; it will require Wikipedia to better understand its own culture of knowledge production. In this same spirit, we acknowledge that the participants interviewed for this study do not represent the entirety of women, genders, or perspectives within the Wikipedia movement, and thus this study cannot and does not speak for all women Wikipedians or those who have left the community. There are many disparate and diverse communities of editors who self-identify as women within the greater Wikipedia community, and factors such as personality type, communication style [16], and lived experience affect the ways in which these women perceive their gender and work. Finally, this study in no way suggests that those who identify as male or any other gender don't engage in emotional labor as well; it is only that this possibility cannot be discussed empirically at this point in our research.

Nascent and non-generalizable as these findings are, they nevertheless provide a new perspective for considering the often overlooked and undervalued work that many people, often those who are socially marginalized, do to participate in online spaces designed, built, and organized—usually without due acknowledgement—according to the norms of a dominant culture.

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