

Wikipedia and the Representation of Reality, by Zachary J. McDowell and Matthew A. Vetter. Routledge, 2021. 140 pp.

Reviewed by Vanessa Osborne, University of Southern California

In *Wikipedia and the Representation of Reality*, Zachary J. McDowell and Matthew A. Vetter grapple with Wikipedia's contradictions. Despite Wikipedia's reputation as a questionable source that "just anyone" can edit, the authors point to recent research that finds that Wikipedia's credibility rivals that of established, expert-written reference sources (27). Despite Wikipedia's ambitious goal to represent all the world's knowledge, critics charge it with leaving out categories of knowledge and with hostility to new editors (38-39, xii). As McDowell and Vetter show, hidden hierarchies and practices shape the encyclopedia's project, contradicting Wikipedia's assertion that it is a free and democratic space with "no firm rules" (16).

McDowell and Vetter engage deeply with Wikipedia's contradictions to determine how Wikipedia works and where it fails. Their book draws particular attention to Wikipedia's challenges representing historically marginalized people and topics. As educators who edit Wikipedia and assign Wikipedia editing in the classroom, McDowell and Vetter speak to composition instructors concerned with teaching source evaluation and to those interested in the opaque systems that constitute knowledge construction. For instructors using Wikipedia editing as a teaching tool, this text is a valuable resource that saves instructors from sifting through Wikipedia admin pages to glean the site's policies and arcane practices. But the book is also useful for those who do not assign Wikipedia assignments in their classroom. The authors offer an insightful contribution to the conversation on what comprises a credible source and the critical role sourced writing plays in shaping and determining what enters into the archive of shared knowledge.

McDowell and Vetter's high stakes project investigates the goals, workings and consequences of Wikipedia, an endeavor that is much more than an interrogation into a website. Analyzing Wikipedia's workings is an epistemological examination of how raw information becomes codified, shaped, and arbitrated into knowledge and ultimately into our shared reality. Wikipedia matters because, as the broadest, most accessible, and widest used encyclopedia in existence, its entries influence global public knowledge. It shapes what we know about our world, our history, and our current events. Furthermore, in a heated journalistic climate characterized by contested information and charges of bias, Wikipedia's reliability, and the methods used to ensure reliability are worthy of adoption by other information portals.

Chapter one details the authors' rationale and methodology, what they term an "archeological approach" designed to unearth the "hidden systems of conditions and relations that shape Wikipedia" (16). Wikipedia has five pillars that guide its operations, with "Wikipedia has no firm rules" among these pillars. However, McDowell and Vetter have deduced that a well-entrenched hierarchy and ambiguous policies shape the volunteer-editors' experience and direct the output of the project. This chapter also identifies how Wikipedia's first pillar "Wikipedia is an encyclopedia" inexorably links this digital project to print culture and to the exclusionary conventions of the encyclopedia as a genre, a crucial point in Chapters two and three.

In tracing Wikipedia's shift from a spurious to reliable information source, Chapter two attributes this change to Wikipedia's tripartite content policy of 1) neutral point of view (NPOV), 2) verifiability (V), and 3) no original research (NOR). McDowell and Vetter unpack how Wikipedia's reliability practices function as dynamic and collaborative processes of reporting the scholarly consensus rather than detailing all viewpoints equally. But while these robust policies have increased credibility and quarantined fringe perspectives, Wikipedia's reliance on print sources to uphold V and NOR guidelines undermines its capacity for representation, as it relies on what major print sources publish.

Chapter three's discussion of notability extends the discussion of Wikipedia's efforts to balance reliability with capacious representation. The authors offer recent cases of contested notability to illustrate how the seemingly straightforward test for notability can be manipulated to exclude important figures. McDowell and Vetter interrogate how and why editors repeatedly rejected Wikipedia pages for black, female scientist Clarice Phelps and Nobel Laureate Donna Strickland (prior to her award). Moreover, in similar situations, single editors often exploit the notability tests as power plays using veto power to exclude notable figures or to compel other editors' significant time and labor to support an addition to the archive. Once again, Wikipedia's reliance on print culture and its historically exclusionary practices enters the discussion. Wikipedia's notability standards require significant, varied, reliable, external (typically print) sources. The authors assert that Wikipedia both reflects and exponentially magnifies the biases of print culture—if a subject has not achieved coverage in the reliable sources Wikipedia favors, it excludes the subject.

But exclusion and inequitable representation do not end with the encyclopedia's content. Chapter four details how Wikipedia's community of volunteer editors contribute to its fundamental problems with inclusivity. This chapter identifies the various ways the community pushes away newcomers—through gatekeeping by more knowledgeable editors or overt harassment. Wikipedia's calls to "Be Bold" and "Assume Good Faith" come under scrutiny; the authors challenge these imperatives by examining just who feels empowered by these

principles and how they may be exploited by gatekeepers and harassers. The chapter concludes with a suggestion that Wikipedia's community embraces active and deliberate inclusion initiatives and practices.

Chapter five asserts that Wikipedia can and must address its fundamental problems with representation and inclusivity while simultaneously maintaining its reliability. Wikipedia's origin, in techno-utopian energies of the internet's early days, has, until recently, occluded its blind spots and flaws. McDowell and Vetter have hope in new initiatives and tools—a Universal Code of Conduct for Wikipedia editors—and educational projects that inspire a cadre of diverse new contributors. Wikipedia can adapt to these active inclusion practices because of its ability to nimbly accommodate change and must adopt them in order to equitably work toward its mission to comprehensively contain all the world's knowledge.

McDowell and Vetter's book exhibits a deep knowledge of the workings, contradictions, and flaws that underlie Wikipedia, knowledge that benefits anyone teaching about source evaluation, how information becomes codified into knowledge and how some content is prioritized over other content. The book is at its best when it illustrates the policies and nuances using specific examples of policies in action. To this end, readers could use more examples, especially of the kind of assignments the authors see as meaningful contributions to students' learning and to Wikipedia's mission of inclusivity. Furthermore, some timely attention to recent curriculum wars and concerns over the framing of history and current events in school and university settings would render their argument about shaping reality more salient. Educators may finish the book hopeful that Wikipedia will improve to better serve its mission and eager to contribute but could use tangible ways to begin this important work.

Los Angeles, California