

A Scourge to the Pillar of Neutrality: A WikiProject Fighting Systemic Bias

[Extended Abstract]

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ABSTRACT

WikiProject Countering Systemic Bias consists of a small group of English-language Wikipedia editors attempting to counterbalance Western-leaning content on the site. A population survey of members of this WikiProject is currently underway and will be followed by online interviews with select editors. This poster will present preliminary findings from the survey and interviews in order to understand how this group perceives bias on Wikipedia and how they work together to fight it.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.3:n. [Information Interfaces]: Group and Organization Interfaces – Collaborative computing, Web-based interaction, Computer-supported cooperative work; K.4.3 [Computers and Society]: Organizational Impacts – Computer-supported collaborative work.

Keywords

Wikipedia, wiki, collaboration, users, bias, survey, interview

1. INTRODUCTION

After signing up to be a member of WikiProject Countering Systemic Bias (WPCSB), User Carl Kenner wrote on the members page: “Although I’m a rich white guy, I’m also a feminist anti-racism activist who fights for the rights of the poor and oppressed” [1]. Since its inception in 2004, three hundred and sixty English-language Wikipedia editors have registered as part of this WikiProject, a loose association of editors who organize editing tasks and highlight underrepresented, non-Western content areas in need of further work. With an approach to content development that is weary of conflict and edit wars, the WPCSB “concentrates upon remedying omissions (entire topics, or particular sub-topics in extant articles) rather than on either (1) protesting inappropriate inclusions, or (2) trying to remedy issues of how material is presented” [2]. This stance is aligned with Bruns [3] conception of Wikipedia as a forum for “representations of knowledge” rather than a canon of definitive truth, and the project offers guidelines on how its editors can collect and

analyze information; increase self-awareness and improve contribution habits; and use procedural instructions and protocols to direct other editors. The overall effort is to counterbalance systemic bias inherent in the system, which User Cerejota calls “a scourge to the pillar of neutrality” [1].

Systemic bias is a problem that Wikipedia itself acknowledges, stating on its “About” page: “Wikipedia may reflect the cultural, age, socio-economic, and other biases of its contributors. There is no systematic process to make sure that ‘obviously important’ topics are written about, so Wikipedia may contain unexpected oversights and omissions” [4]. A 2005 University of Wurzburg survey of users revealed that the average English language Wikipedia editor is: male; aged 15-49; from a developed, Northern-hemisphere, Christian-majority nation; technically inclined and formally educated; and a native English speaker of European decent [5]. More recent studies indicate that this same demographic produces systemic bias against content of interest to women and may be a contributing factor to the excessively low participation rate by female editors [6] [7]. The issue of systemic bias is a very real and serious challenge to the continuing evolution of Wikipedia’s content and contributors [8].

This research probes the thoughts and motivations of WPCSB, a collective that is continuing to mobilize efforts to fight systemic bias on Wikipedia. Through a population survey and online qualitative interviews, editors are provided the forum to express their reasons for joining the project, as well as their feelings on content bias, systemic bias, system policies and protocols, automated editing tools, and the editing community in general. Data collection began in May 2011 and will run through August 2011. This poster will present preliminary results and analysis from the survey as well as prominent themes and notable accounts garnered from interviews.

2. DATA COLLECTION

After reviewing comments on the SPCSB “Discussion” page, as well as personal comments left by each member when they joined the initiative, a survey instrument was constructed using Qualtrics Survey Software. An invitation to participate in the survey was posted on the “User talk” page of each member, stating the goals of the research and securing informed consent. The 20-30 minute survey presents questions that address: overall Wikipedia and online usage and contributions, communication with the editing community, membership in WPCSB, thoughts and feelings on bias on Wikipedia, overall participation in online and offline social actions, and basic demographic information. At the conclusion of the survey, WPCSB members can express their

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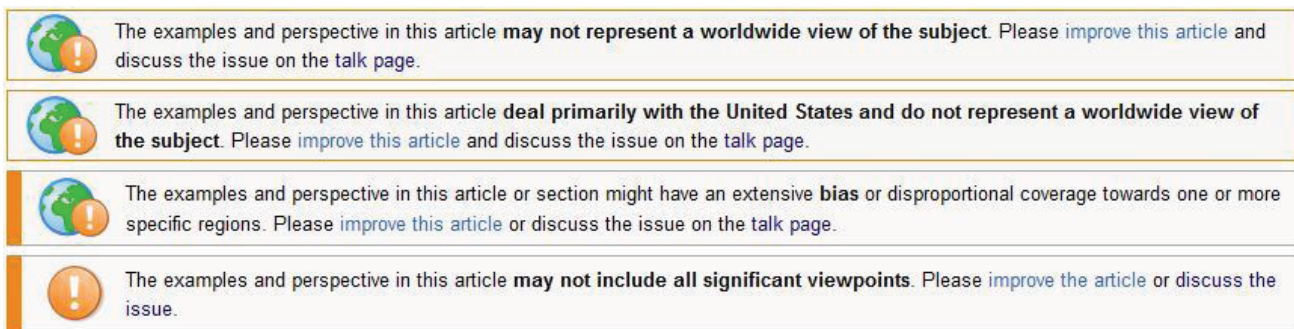


Figure 1. Examples of Cleanup Templates used by WPCSB Editors

interest in a one-on-one online interview to be scheduled during Summer 2011.

Interviews will follow-up on survey questions, offering the opportunity for open-ended responses to questions of bias on Wikipedia and participation in WPCSB. In addition, further questions will be posed to understand patterns of collaboration with other editors and automated editing tools.

3. SIGNIFICANCE

Though Wikipedia boasts thousands of registered users and even more non-registered contributors, some research has indicated that a much smaller subset of editors shape a disproportionate amount of the site's content and social norms [9]. This study explores how one small collective of editors is trying to instigate large changes in content that will benefit users interested in upholding and improving the Neutral Point of View core editing policy. Data gained from the survey and interviews may contribute additional perspectives on what motivates Wikipedia editors and how social capital is leveraged in this online community.

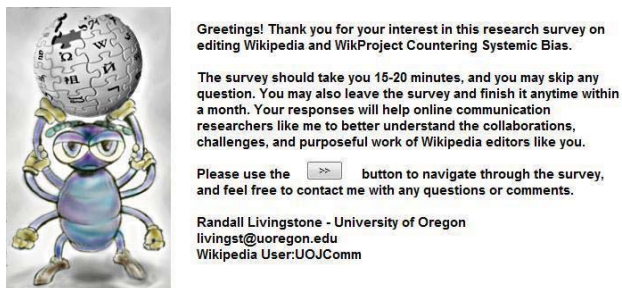


Figure 2. Population Survey Introduction

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