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WIKIPEDIA'S ENLIGHTENMENT PROBLEM: DECOLONIZING WESTERN EPISTEMOLOGIES THROUGH CRITICAL OPEN EDUCATION PRACTICES

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Wikipedia's founder Jimmy Wales once described the vision behind Wikipedia in the following optimistic terms: "Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge" ("Wikipedia Founder," 2004). Despite this lofty goal, Wikipedia continues to falter in pursuit of its ambitions due to representational and colonial problems rooted in its very core. Although Wikipedia boasts over 280 language versions, the English version is by far both the most well-developed and the most trafficked. Because the English version receives more traffic, the editing of content related to culture outside of Anglophone geographies and in the Global South is often done by editors who have no real connection to the culture or geography of those topics (Graham, 2011). Furthermore, while Wikipedia's gender representation problem is both legendary and well-documented (Cohen, 2011; Collier & Bear, 2012; Glott, Schmidt, & Ghosh, 2010; Gruwell, 2015; Wadewitz, 2013), systemic biases within Wikipedia extend far beyond gender, sparking concern over how Wikipedia represents "reality" (McDowell & Vetter, 2021), particularly because collecting "the sum of all human knowledge" has, so far, been a project taken on by predominantly young, white, western males (Vetter & Pettigrew, 2017). In this paper we dig deeper into the root of these concerning issues, looking in particular at how Wikipedia's foundational principles and assumptions stand in its own way of collecting "the sum of all human knowledge."

Although Wikipedia uniquely challenges the boundaries of the encyclopedic genre in terms of collaboration, technology, authority, and knowledge production, it remains an encyclopedia, an epistemological method and forum that carries with it the ideological traces and functions of Enlightenment print culture (Vetter, 2020). Such print culture manifests itself most visibly in the Wikipedia policy of verifiability. Although this policy

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keeps the encyclopedia in check by ensuring that editors support their claims about a subject with a reliable (and published) source, a concern emerges when we recognize that verifiability and reliability are typically only granted to written, published sources. Despite its vision, Wikipedia omits a tremendous amount of human knowledge, especially from cultures without a (privileged) history of print culture. Cultures and regions representing the global south, indigenous cultures and peoples, and other types of knowledge where an oral tradition plays a large part in the transmission and curation of knowledge are simply not accounted for in Wikipedia. Consequently, Wikipedia's vision (somewhat paradoxically) remains hindered by its adherence to colonialist epistemologies that continue to define the encyclopedic genre.

This paper articulates Wikipedia's colonialist epistemology problem by 1) reviewing the core content policies that prohibit alternative and indigenous sources of knowledge, especially verifiability and notability policies and 2) focusing on direct examples of the encyclopedia's inability to represent indigenous knowledge. In linking contemporary Wikipedia policies to colonialist ideologies, we also trace the encyclopedia genre from its western predecessor, showcasing how Wikipedia continues this tradition via its own techno-optimistic rhetoric. Finally, we discuss failed attempts to address the issue of indigenous knowledge within Wikipedia, and make recommendations for its future.

The fifth of Wikipedia's 5 pillars, "the fundamental principles" that guide the community, states that the encyclopedia "has no firm rules," further explained in the following: "Wikipedia has policies and guidelines, but they are not carved in stone; their content and interpretation can evolve over time" ("WP: Five Pillars," 2022). It is this fundamental principle that we attend to in discussing the encyclopedia's future and its capacity to meet the ever-changing needs of a robust free knowledge movement. More specifically, Wikipedia's future depends on its community's ability to dynamically evolve, decolonize, and to imagine an encyclopedia that is actively inclusive of a more global epistemology. The encyclopedia community will need to not only figure out new methods for building and encouraging a diverse editorship in order to listen and include marginalized voices; it will also need to engage in deep reflection on how policies such as verifiability and neutrality have limited the historical inclusion of alternative knowledge traditions.

To accomplish this, first, Wikipedia must gather broad-based input both within and beyond the immediate community on issues related to the exclusion of indigenous forms of knowledge, informing a deep reflection on Wikipedia's place in the encyclopedic tradition. Next, community members must commit to an outcome-oriented structure for policy recommendations related to inclusion of indigenous knowledge. For example, the "Oral Citations" project, failed to make a mark on the larger structures of the encyclopedia because of its lack of integrated outcomes and policy recommendations. Finally, and perhaps most difficult of all, the Wikipedia community must acknowledge and commit to raising awareness regarding Wikipedia's knowledge-making constraints within educational and other public sectors.

Policy alone will not solve the many challenges the encyclopedia faces. Wikipedia cannot accomplish its goals without first decolonizing itself, through which the community must both re-imagine core content policies, as well as diversify its editorial

demographic by welcoming in new users from under-represented categories and geographies. Acknowledging this, we explore methods for participation and engagement in educational and other affiliate spaces that forward a decolonial agenda, one that centers action around indigenous knowledge-making practices. Finally, building on the work of Sarah Lambert's proposed concept of socially-just open education (2018), we also articulate a need for more critical open education practices that will help inscribe and articulate the need for the aforementioned re-imagination. Wikipedia will need to enact a project not only of representational justice that recognizes traditional western epistemologies, but also one of redistributive and recognitive justice that also unsettles its dominant knowledge-making operations.

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