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“It’s Incompatible with the Views of the Community about Themselves and Their Defining Characteristics”: Norms and Knowledge Production within the Transgender Wikipedia Page

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Abstract

In this poster, we present a typology of norms shaping editing decisions within the English version of the Wikipedia Transgender topic page. Using Talk page content, where editors negotiate these decisions, we employed an inductive coding approach to identify these norms as: Wikipedia, individual belief, social, and transgender community. Findings indicate that while editors often utilize norms outside of Wikipedia to shape editing decisions, these norms must ultimately be framed as Wikipedia norms before any suggested edits are made to the Wikipedia page. This finding informs future research of how such formalized modes of knowledge production may suppress certain perspectives on marginalized topics.

Keywords: social media; social constructionism; library and information science; gender studies; knowledge production

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1. Introduction

The growth of collaborative web platforms signifies new potential for democratic participation in the production of social and cultural resources (Jenkins, 1991). Yet questions of what perspectives and interests govern the creation of these resources remain (König, 2012). Wikipedia (WP), an online collaborative encyclopedia, constitutes a popular platform with over 121 million unique monthly visitors as of October, 2015 (ComScore, 2015). Given its recognition as a site of knowledge production, it proves important to understand processes undergirding knowledge production that allow certain interests and perspectives to persist over time. To this end, we employ an exploratory case study to address the following research question: How do social elements such as group membership, rules, and norms, affect individuals’ knowledge co-construction in WP, specifically the English *Transgender* page?

We will address our research question by adopting a social constructionist approach to assess talk page discussion related to the *Transgender* page. We selected the *Transgender* topic page as a site of analysis given that “transgender” has experienced dramatic shifts in meaning and interpretation over time, and continues to in present day. This lack of stability in meaning thus clearly renders “transgender” as a socially constructed topic likely to yield a series of competing perspectives and worldviews shaping how knowledge about this topic is conveyed. Shared norms and interpretive practices of participants related to this topic are codified within WP *Talk* pages, where individuals negotiate “whose expertise is trusted, what knowledge is included and how” (König, 2012, p. 163). These talk pages are analyzed in our exploratory case study, presented below. Findings from our analysis elicit further discussion related to some of the issues associated with knowledge production within collaborative platforms, as well as develop a set of coding categories that can be developed for further use in research analysis and design.

2. Background

2.1. Social Constructionism

Social constructionism accounts for how individuals create shared meanings that guide their actions within a given situation. In order to understand each other and co-create a social reality, individuals must work together to objectify their inward subjective states utilizing “models, assumptions, and schemas” (Scott, 2008, p. 68) recognizable to them, e.g., language. It follows that these social processes shape individual behaviors since they must be enacted in specific ways to be mutually comprehensible, e.g.,

following grammatical rules. Of particular importance are social organizations that facilitate certain social processes, e.g., norms, rules, habits, over others and therefore affect how knowledge is codified and constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This theoretical emphasis on social organizations suggests that social processes employed within WP influence what information is privileged and how it becomes codified as knowledge.

2.2. Wikipedia

WP represents a typical web 2.0 platform that engenders a "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 1991), where individuals can create knowledge regardless of their background. Features such as a de-hierarchicalized structure reify this culture, leading to utopian discourses around civic engagement (König, 2012). Some research criticizes this culture, suggesting knowledge creation is best left to experts (Jenkins, 1991) and WP should be used as a "research starter" (Eijkman, 2010, p. 179).

Other research suggests that neither perspective gets at the true issue, which regards how social and technological actors privilege certain knowledge types over others (König, 2012; Hargittai & Shaw, 2014). Studies adopting this latter approach argue that norms both internal to WP, i.e., the site's three key policies of neutral point of view (NPOV), no original research, and verifiability ("Wikipedia: Core content policies", n.d.), and external norms, e.g., emphasizing credibility of established media institutions, play key roles in shaping knowledge construction (see Sundin, 2010; König, 2012).

3. Methodology

In this small-scale pilot, exploratory case study, our data consisted of all *Talk* page¹ content within the English *Transgender* topic page before August 1, 2015. Data was imported into NVivo, a qualitative research environment and codes were derived inductively from the data using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). After coding a random 20% of the data, we achieved acceptable inter-coder reliability for this exploratory research (Cohen's kappa = 0.88).

4. Findings

Several themes emerged from the data pertaining to our guiding research question of how social elements such as group membership, rules, and norms, affect individuals' knowledge co-construction within *Transgender* page. These themes corresponded with norms both internal to (i.e., WP norms, Other) and external of WP (i.e., Individual belief, Transgender community norms, Social norms).

Table 1 depicts the main coding categories derived in descending order by count. WP norms was most utilized, present in 54% (n=631) of *Talk* page content, followed by individual belief (24%, n=281). Social norms appeared least frequently, occurring in 8.5% of the content (n=100). Several categories experienced considerable overlap as indicated by correlation of word similarity calculated via Pearson's correlation coefficient, including: transgender community norms and social norms (r=0.78) and transgender community norms and individual belief (r=0.7). Other categories experienced less overlap, particularly WP norms with transgender community norms (r=0.4) and social norms (r=0.4).

5. Discussion

Although WP norms characterize *Talk* page content, editors also utilized individual belief, transgender community norms, and social norms, which will collectively be referred to as informal norms, to support arguments made for editorial inclusion within the topic page. This finding supports research by Matei and Dobrescu (2010), which argues that ambiguity colors editorial decision-making given the subjectivity of individual knowledge. Further similarities to their findings are present in our observation that WP norms are appropriated to support such subjectivity.

For example, take a recent discussion of whether to include statements made by a former psychiatric chief of John Hopkins University. Those who relied on individual belief appealed to the WP norm of no original research by arguing for the inclusion of a "renowned physician[s]"

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Transgender>

Coding Category	Definition	Example	n
Wikipedia norms			631
No original research	"...material—such as facts, allegations, and ideas—for which no reliable, published sources exist" (Wikipedia, 2015a).	<i>No matter what emotion you and another WP editor find by discussing your sexual histories, it's not going to be something you can use to improve the article, since it's Original Research.</i>	318
NPOV	"...representing fairly, proportionately, and, as far as possible, without bias, all of the significant views that have been published by reliable sources on a topic" (Wikipedia, 2015b).	<i>It is not our position as WP editors to promote a specific viewpoint... we present a Neutral Point of View of all the ideas that everyone has.</i>	99
Verifiability	"...anyone using the encyclopedia can check that the information comes from a reliable source," which consist of "published sources with a reputation for fact-checking and accuracy" (Wikipedia, 2015c).	<i>Just because the cross-dressing community knows that most CDs are heterosexual doesn't mean a citation isn't needed.</i>	97
Other	Miscellaneous other Wikipedia norms	<i>His views are WP: Fringe.</i>	97
Individual belief	Expression of tacit knowledge, feeling, emotion, or experience.	<i>Gender is whether you believe yourself to be male or female.</i>	281
Transgender community norms	Viewpoints expressed by individuals who identify as transgender or claim to know the perspectives of this community.	<i>This description of transgender is incompatible with the views of the community about themselves and their defining characteristics.</i>	152
Social norms	Majority view, popular opinion, or current view.	<i>The material was written before current distinctions were raised.</i>	100

Table 1. Major Coding Categories (This table provides major coding categories, their definitions, an example, and the amount of times the category was coded).

perspective. Those opposing this action appealed to transgender community norms by countering that such inclusion imposed "transphobic hate-[speech]," citing a WP policy regarding fringe perspectives – e.g., *It doesn't matter how notable someone is and their expertise, their view can still be considered WP:FRINGE*. The decision over which policy had more salience to the article was ultimately relegated to administrator intervention, allowing another subjective perspective to arbitrate the issue.

Given that WP norms are used within talk pages to negotiate the legitimacy of subjective knowledge claims, the perspectives that ultimately gain legitimacy tend to be those that can best reflect the formalized modes of knowledge production conveyed by these norms. For example, scientific perspectives tend to dominate talk page debates, as articulated by the following *Talk* page participant:

Isn't it facile pointing to a WP policy saying "stick to the science" when a large reason for the existence of terms like transgender, instead of just the more scientific terms like transsexual and transvestite, is that the scientific terms stigmatize individuals and the science behind these terms contributes to a wider cultural blindness?

Therefore, our findings also indicate that the practice of supporting informal norms by formalizing them into WP-specific norms may suppress perspectives crucial to understanding marginalized topics. Such suppression will particularly occur when conflict exists between how the community itself can frame its perspectives into WP norms versus dominant institutions, whose perspectives better align with WP norms, such as the scientific community,

6. Conclusion

This study is not without limitations, namely its limited coverage of talk pages for one, English language, topic. We thus intend to complete further research that examines additional *Talk* page content for other WP pages to support our findings. Specifically, these findings indicate that individuals employ informal norms when making sense of information for collaborative knowledge production, which confirms both previous WP research (Matei & Dobrescu, 2010), as well as Library and Information Science (LIS) research, which contends that individuals appeal to the body, mind, heart, and soul when making sense of information (Dervin, 1998; Godbold, 2013). However, expressions of informal norms need to be couched within a WP norm before the information in question can be codified within the *Transgender* topic page. This need to position codified knowledge within a particular frame suggests that certain expressions of knowledge related to being transgender, specifically more informal dimensions such as personal experience and belief, are mitigated. Future research should further examine the question of whether WP is truly participatory by determining the degree to which informal norms are eschewed as legitimate information sources, particularly for marginalized topics, and to what potential detriment.

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