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Making women's history matter: Female presence in and through Wikipedia

Dolores Alemany
Department of Communication and Social Psychology, University of Alicante, San Vicente del Raspeig, Spain
E-mail address: dolores.alemany@ua.es

Abstract:

Wikipedia, "this very peculiar artefact of human knowledge" (Bellomi & Bonato, 2005: 2), has come to stay. Yet the powerful access it provides to worldwide data that started with the XXI century – although a successful example of participatory culture– seems to be rather gender biased. A close examination of statistics as regards to the presence of biographies of women will show up to what point females are under-represented. The fact that Wikipedia biographies can help add visibility to women of all times should make us conscious about the presence (or else, absence) of notable women in Wikipedia. In this research, the focus will be on Spanish social reformers and civil rights women activists, analysing specifically the period covering the 1930s and the Spanish civil war. Besides, the case of women editing about women will be explored to illustrate the current state of the visibility of women in and through Wikipedia. Women's equality, unfortunately, does not follow automatically from social revolutions. Raising awareness about the situation of women locally and internationally and creating networks of activists is the only guarantee of women being the protagonists of their own history. It is important to get more women involved in Wikipedia volunteer edit-a-thon events to write updated profiles of brilliant women that may still be out of history.

Keywords: women's presence, social changes, Wikipedia, Spanish second Republic, Spanish civil war

Introduction

Being launched in 2001 and initially intended to be edited by experts (Nupedia project), Wikipedia has grown over the years as a free encyclopedia in which anyone willing to edit is allowed to do it. This open source approach has been probably both the key to its extraordinary growth (5,398,687 articles in the English Wikipedia, May 2017) and the cause of friction with academia. Opinions may vary as to whether Wikipedia is a reliable source of information but, although it is not well accepted to cite it, the trend is that eighty-two percent of students in higher education turn to Wikipedia as their starting point of course-related research, offering "a mixture of coverage, currency, convenience and comprehensibility" (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). The impact of Wikipedia is undeniable nowadays (22.3 million users, August, 2014), attracting 115,000 Wikipedia active editors (January, 2016) from all over the world (Smith, 2017).

Wikipedia is said to be freely collaborative, and its contents are a reflection of a collective way of generating content which is expected to be global and democratic. Yet the systemic gender bias of Wikipedia exists among others, i.e. racial bias, social bias. The purpose of this article is to explore the gender gap (aka gender bias) of Wikipedia regarding the extremely low percentage of women editing contents (between 8.5-15%) and female under-representation (shorter, non-existing) through women's biographies.

The systemic bias on Wikipedia may be that of contemporary Internet culture, the main editor profile being that one of a "young, male, English-speaking, educated, technologically aware, and wealthy enough to spare time for editing" (Quilter, 2012: 4). In 2011, a global Wikipedia survey was jointly presented by United Nations University and UNU-MERIT indicating that 13% of contributors to Wikipedia were women (Glott, R.; Schmidt, P.; Ghosh, R. 2010). The Canadian journalist Sue Gardner, executive director of Wikimedia Foundation at the time, expressed in her blog nine reasons why she thinks women don't edit Wikipedia (Gardner, 2011), which show a rather stereotypical approach (Jemielniak, 2016): women being too busy, conflict-averse or not sufficiently self-confident to edit in a not sufficiently friendly interface, the overall atmosphere being misogynist and male-off putting in a way that women's contributions and contents might have more chances of being either reverted or deleted.

It is difficult to explain this significant gender gap only by the stereotypical (Morell, 2010), conflict and geek-driven environment of Wikipedia (Collier and Bear, 2012), especially when Wikipedia tasks are performed by a community of volunteers, which would mean real opportunities for global and democratic participation and outcomes. Curiously enough, this is not a problem that only affects Wikipedia. The gender gap also exists in other digital communities such as the Free Libre and Open Source movement (Reagle, 2013).

Biographies are a good source to study gender bias in Wikipedia. Graells-Garrido, Lalmas & Menczer (2015) presented a close research from computational linguistics on how women and men are characterized in their Wikipedia biographies analysing biographical content, which proved that there are "significant differences in meta-data, language, and network structure that can be attributed not only to the mirroring of the offline world, but also to gender bias endogenous to content generation in Wikipedia" (Graells-Garrido et al., 2015: 172). Research shows that male editors are less likely to edit women's biographies (Reagle and Rhue, 2011: 21). Besides, some major findings in women's biographies in Wikipedia are

related to the presence of more content related to marriage than men's. Women biographies are written differently (Graells-Garrido et al, 2015: 166).

Wikipedia is hosted and funded by the Wikimedia Foundation, a non-profit organization which also operates Wikipedia-related projects such as Wiktionary and Wikibooks. As well as Sue Gardner being the first executive director (2007- 2014) of Wikimedia Foundation, Lila Tretikov (2014-2016) and Katherine Maher (2016-present) have been the next ones. What is relevant is that the three of them are influential women in the culture of Wikipedia who have been responsible for many initiatives that involve greater diversity of contributors, new geo-location tools to help users find local content more easily, and better support and tools for users in the second and third world.

Besides trying to understand why more women do not join Wikipedia, the ultimate goal of the present research is what can be done about it. Taking action in what has been proved a fact can be done through edit-a-thons.

Methodology

To explore the gender gap in Wikipedia, the research focused on thirty historical women figures from the Second Republic in Spain and how they are characterized in Wikipedia articles. These women were main protagonists of the Second Republic in Spain and suffered a double stigma: being women, and being left-winged (silenced from official history). These women were noticeable in Spain those times: they were artists, teachers, activists, members of parliament, writers, musicians, actresses and intellectuals during the Second Republic in Spain, the democratic political regime that existed in Spain from 1931 until the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) when Francisco Franco would take control of the country, establishing a dictatorship that would last for forty years.

Once the thirty selected Spanish women biographies had been registered, they were closely examined as to the last time they had been edited in both Spanish and English. Special attention was paid to aspects such as the dates when the latest editions happened, the presence of photographs, translations to other languages, and length of the entries.

Figure 1. Relevant historical women figures in the period of the Second Republic in Spain: their visibility in Wikipedia biographies (updated 14th May, 2017)

Surname(s), First name	Image	Spanish /Last edited	English/Last edited
Álvarez Resano, Julia	NO	Yes/25th March 2017	NO
Arribas Fernández, Piedad	NO	Yes/14th June 2014	NO
Arrojo Maroto, Carmen	NO	NO	NO
Berenguer Laosa, Sara	Yes	Yes/10th March2017	Yes/10thNov2016
Bohigas Gavilanes, Francisca	NO	Yes/ 14th April 2017	NO
Burgos Seguí, Carmen (de) (Colombine)	Yes	Yes/4th May 2017	Yes/29th March 2017
Cambrils Sendra, María	Yes	Yes/9th Feb 2017	NO
Campoamor, Clara	Yes	Yes/4th May 2017	Yes/1st Feb 2017
Camprubí Aymar, Zenobia	Yes	Yes/1st May 2017	Yes/10th April 2017
Casanova, Sofía	Yes	Yes/5th May 2017	NO
Claramunt Creus, Teresa	Yes	Yes/ 10th April 2017	Yes/13th March 2017

Comaposada Guillén, Mercedes	Yes	Yes/3rd May 2017	Yes/3rd Nov 2016
Estorach Esterri, Soledad	Yes	Yes/6th March 2017	NO
García-Blanco Manzano, Veneranda	NO	Yes/25th Feb 2017	NO
González González, Isabel (Azucena Roja)	NO	Yes/19th Feb 2017	NO
Gustavo, Soledad (Teresa Mañé)	Yes	Yes/14th April 2017	NO
Ibarruri, Dolores	Yes	Yes/23rd April 2017	Yes/17th April 2017
Iturbe, Lola	Yes	Yes/23th Sept 2016	Yes/10th Nov 2016
Kent, Victoria	Yes	Yes/8th May 2017	Yes/22nd April 2017
Lejárraga García, María	Yes	Yes/14th April 2017	Yes/19th Oct 2016
León, María Teresa	NO	Yes/20th April 2017	Yes/6th May 2016
Maeztu Whitney, María (de)	Yes	Yes/4th May 2017	Yes/ 23rd Nov 2016
Montseny, Federica	Yes	Yes/20th April 2017	Yes/27th Feb 2017
Nelken, Margarita	Yes	Yes/6th May 2017	Yes/31st Oct 2016
Picornell Femenias, Aurora	Yes	Yes /28th April 2017	Yes/17th Nov 2016
Poch i Gascón, Amparo	Yes	Yes/28th March 2017	Yes/2nd Oct 2016
Sánchez Saornil, Lucía	Yes	Yes/28th April 2017	Yes/2nd March 2017
Torre Gutiérrez, Matilde (de la)	Yes	Yes/ 10th April 2017	NO
Xirgu, Margarita	Yes	Yes/10th May 2017	Yes/3rd March 2017
Zambrano, Maria	Yes	Yes/11th May 2017	Yes/24th April 2017

[Source: own contribution]

Results and Discussion

All the biographies but one (Carmen Arrojo's) have been edited in Spanish. There are 11 biographies that have not been edited in English yet. When the biographies have not been edited in English, they offer Wikipedia entries in other languages, usually the languages of Spanish autonomous communities (e.g. Isabel González González, Català; Veneranda Manzano, Asturianu, Català; Julia Álvarez Resano, Català, Euskera/Basque; Matilde de la Torre, Català). Only a few of the biographies are edited in Esperanto (Federica Montseny's). Esperanto is a constructed language that entered the education system of China (2011) and Hungary. It is also claimed to be official language in the micronation of Rose Island since 1968. The version in Esperanto of Amparo Gascon's biography is much more complete than in English.

Eight biographies do not show up a photograph of the person in the Spanish biography. There are cases in which the Spanish version contains a photograph but the English version shows objects: either a bust (Clara Campoamor) or a street name (Amparo Poch); or else, no photo is displayed (Victoria Kent). In the English Wikipedia entry, Zenobia Camprubi, who is referred to as Juan Ramón Jiménez's wife, is shown in a photograph in her biography together with her husband.

As for the names, apart from the Spanish naming customs which are mentioned in Wikipedia having first or paternal family name and second or maternal family name, there is

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proliferation of long names and the use of *alias* for some of the names: Isabel González González (Azucena Roja), Veneranda Manzano (Veneranda García-Blanco Manzano), María Lejárraga (María de la O Lejárraga García, also known as María Martínez Sierra, a pseudonym she took from her husband's surnames, Gregorio Martínez Sierra), and Soledad Gustavo (Teresa Mañé).

The English biographies are far shorter than the Spanish ones. The biographies in English, being shorter, tell about the relationships of the women they describe with famous male well-known intellectuals, as happens with Zenobia Camprubí. This is interesting in the sense that the Spanish version does not highlight it. This is the case of María Teresa León, who was "the niece of the Spanish feminist and writer María Goyri (the wife of Ramón Menéndez Pidal). She herself was married to the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti. In the case of María de Maeztu, "she was sister of the writer, journalist and occasional diplomat, Ramiro de Maeztu and the painter Gustavo de Maeztu". In some cases, even if the Spanish biography is quite long, the English version is half edited (Margarita Xirgu, Amparo Poch y Gascón), and a claim can be found as the one shown below:

Figure 2. Screen capture of a claim for expanding contents on a biographical article

[source: https://goo.gl/5sLLJe]

A *stub* in Wikipedia jargon is an article deemed too short to provide encyclopedic coverage of a subject. Usually, Wikipedia provides general guidance for dealing with stubs. The indication to expand the edition can be done in some other ways, as can be seen in the following extract from Aurora Picornell's biography:

Figure 3. Infobox from the biography article of Aurora Picornell

[source: https://goo.gl/ERKgqv]

Other times, a warning has been found such as the one in Dolores Ibarruri's biography (Figure 4), indicating the need to reference the edition correctly.

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English biographies were last edited much earlier than the Spanish versions; sometimes almost a year earlier than the Spanish biographies had been edited (e.g. María Teresa León's biography: English, May 2016 and Spanish, April 2017). Three of the Spanish biographies were last updated on the 14th April, which is the anniversary of the Second Republic.

Special mention must be made of biographies which need urgent editing, which is the case of Amparo Poch's (poor contents in English last edited on 2nd Oct 2016) and Piedad Arribas's (last edited in Spanish 14th June, 2014, and not edited in English). Sofía Casanova was a woman with an astonishing culture and career. She could speak five languages and was mentioned as the Spanish candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925), a war journalist, a poetess and a writer, she travelled all her life. Her biography has been translated to Català, Galego, Italian and Polski but it hasn't been translated into English yet, which seems to be quite contradictory. The case of Carmen Arrojo is unique in its kind and should be questioned. Her biography has not been edited in Wikipedia yet, either Spanish or English. She died on 6th April 2017 at the age of 98, precisely when this research was being done. She worked as a teacher, and was an activist for women's rights in the Unified Socialist Youth, the Anti-Fascist Student Union and the Anti-Facist Youth Alliance. There is audiovisual testimony about her in the digital Archive of the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist Dictatorship, which started in the summer of 2007. Several teams of graduate students were doing a great job recording audiovisual testimonies of militants, witnesses, and victims of the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist repression. The collection Spanish Civil War Memory comprises 111 digital objects and it is essential to preserve Spanish historical memory, an issue Carmen Arrojo was quite worried about. Her life was full of adventures: she attempted to go into exile with her boyfriend, was captured by the Nationalists in Alicante and detained in a concentration camp. She did not have any identification documents between 1939-52 and also became a teacher in 1969. It was in 2005 when she discovered that her boyfriend had been executed in 1940 and buried in a mass grave in the Paterna cemetery like many other Republicans.

The biographies of these thirty women are extraordinary. Executed, imprisoned or doomed to exile, most of the ones who managed to survive became octogenarians, some of them were over ninety (Carmen Arrojo 98, Sofía Casanova 96, Dolores Ibárruri 93). They were brilliant in the lives they led and the accomplishments they fulfilled. They deserve much more attention on the side of contemporary women as a source of inspiration. That is the reason why planning strategies to target the gender gap in Wikipedia through collaborative editing makes sense nowadays. One of the most fruitful initiatives is to encourage women to edit in Wikipedia edit-a-thons.

An edit-a-thon, a portmanteau of "edit" and "marathon" sometimes also written "editathon", is described in Wikipedia as an organized event where editors of online communities (not only Wikipedia but also OpenStreetMap, LocalWiki, etc.), collaborate in editing and improving contents on specific topics. In January 2011, the British Library, UK, launched a

series of tasks to be performed such as the creation of articles, the contribution to existing articles, the creation of categories and templates aiming at improving the British Library website. Up to 20 editors entered the call through mandatory registration. The real turning point in edit-a-thons started with initiatives like the one taking place in São Paulo, Brazil, aimed at creating and improving Wikipedia articles related to feminism, women's rights and notable women.

In October 2016, a Wikipedia edit-a-thon on "Indian women poets and authors" was held at Breakthrough's Delhi office. The edit-a-thon was aimed at creating/editing Wikipedia pages of Indian women poets and authors who lack representation on the platform currently. A list of some Indian women poets and authors had been made before. Organisers looked at Indian women poets' representation in Wikipedia. While some of them did not have a Wiki page at all, others were underrepresented. A group of 12 participants took part in the event (two of them participated remotely). In November, being Pride month in Delhi, the focus was on LBT women, and a Wikipedia Edit-a-thon on "Indian Queer Feminists" was organized at Breakthrough's Delhi office too, aiming at creating/editing Wikipedia pages of Indian queer feminists who lack representation on the platform currently.

"Women in Science" was also a Wikipedia edit-a-thon organized by the New York Academy of Sciences in 2016. The aim was to bring more female scientists to Wikipedia. People could join for all or part of the live event, or participate virtually throughout the month of November. The event was free. "BBC 100 Women" was a 12-hour edit-a-thon to close the gender gap. Both women and men could take part in that event which was held at the BBC London headquarters in New Broadcasting House on 8th December 2016. People were trained in editing by volunteers from Wikimedia UK. "2017 Art+Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon" counted with over 6,5000 women artists that have new or expanded Wikipedia entries. Across over 200 events held around the world in March, Women's History Month, 2,500 participants did their part to fight the Wikipedia gender gap by improving online resources about women artists. Edit-a-thons are at present being organised regularly in Spain too. In April, 2017, CCALM, Creative Commons Almeria, launched an edit-a-thon to edit information about unknown women.

Conclusion

Women biographies of Spanish relevant women during the period of the Spanish Second Republic in Spain need to be completed in much more detail. Infoboxes lack images and full descriptions in many more cases than were expected. When compared, the English and Spanish versions of the same women's biographies are shockingly unbalanced. Great effort has to be made in balancing contributions in different languages, particularly the English version, which may be the key to the worldwide visibility of women who were relevant in history.

Edit-a-thons have turned into very effective initiatives that help make the gender gap in Wikipedia smaller, increasing female editorship and the visibility of women on the site. Edit-a-thons are now mostly held internationally to commemorate International Women's Day (8th March).

Acknowledgments

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