

Zachary J. McDowell and Matthew A. Vetter, **Wikipedia and the Representation of Reality**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2022, 140 pp, \$59.95 (hardcover).

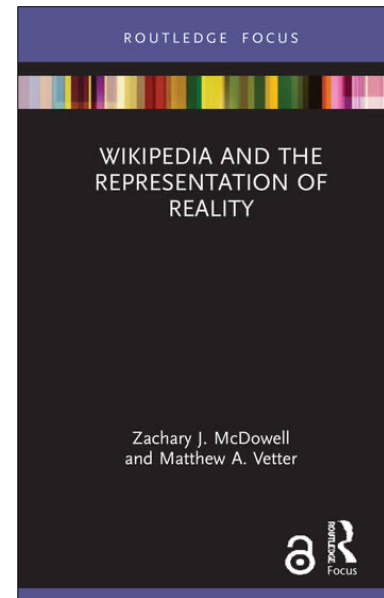
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Wikipedia hardly needs an introduction: The site averages over 7 billion views every month, satisfying quick curiosities and fueling deep dives into esoteric topics alike. Yet the functioning of the site is incredibly opaque to the average reader. The work of gathering, organizing, and presenting information is hidden behind a list of article revisions, anonymous usernames, and a convoluted set of self-referential, consistently debated policies. In their new book, **Wikipedia and the Representation of Reality**, authors Zachary McDowell and Matthew Vetter work to excavate the systems and policies that produce Wikipedia’s knowledge—the knowledge that in many ways structures our world.

Wikipedia has the ambition of being “the sum of all knowledge,” and the authors take this impossible goal seriously (p. 4). In doing so, they distinguish Wikipedia’s ideals (the sum of all knowledge) from the reality (an incredible achievement with some serious limitations) and identify the systematic exclusions that ensure the latter always fails to meet the former. The frame of ideal, reality, and failure repeats throughout the book, as the authors examine the core policies that structure Wikipedia. Even though they emphasize failure, the book never delves into cynicism, tempered as it is by the authors’ palpable affection for the encyclopedia and their commitment to improving the Wikipedian community.

Chapter 1 takes up the core values of Wikipedia, or, as they are known to the editing community, the “Five Pillars.” McDowell and Vetter use the Five Pillars as Wikipedia’s self-definition: It is an encyclopedia, it is neutral, it is open and free, it is a community, and it has no firm rules. While the subsequent chapters engage with how the qualities overlap—and occasionally contradict one another—this chapter examines each individually. McDowell and Vetter bring together the lineage of each pillar, among them, the encyclopedic tradition from ancient Greece and enlightenment-era France and the early 2000s advent of the Creative Commons copyright license that ensures Wikipedia’s content is and stays free.

Additionally, in the first chapter, McDowell and Vetter introduce their “archaeological approach to Wikipedia” (p. 14) that draws on Foucault (1982) and the sociology of knowledge. While somewhat clunkily applied throughout the book, this approach allows them to examine how Wikipedia’s culture has developed over time and how it has become a force that “not only defines the boundaries of ‘what is knowable’ . . . but also shapes ‘how we know’ through the ways in which it allows the collection and distribution of knowledge” (p. 15). The archaeological approach is an apt metaphor, as the authors do serious work to excavate community policies and dig up discussions from Wikipedia articles and talk pages. However, their deep-rooted



knowledge of the Wikipedia community also comes from their own position in regard to the encyclopedia: As they mention in the preface, “we are Wikipedians,” (p. xii) and both have designed Wikipedia-based assignments that bring the encyclopedia into the classroom. Greater reflection about how this familiarity informs their methodological approach would have made for a far richer and more generative section and book.

Chapters 2 and 3 introduce Wikipedia’s key concepts of reliability, or “how do we know,” and notability, or “what is worth knowing.” Reliability and notability are both conceptual as well as practice oriented, resulting in a set of policies about good sources to cite (reliability) and what kinds of content should be included or deleted from the site (notability). As concepts and practices, the norms around reliability and notability have been incredibly successful—resulting in the quantity and quality of the current Wikipedia, which remains, relative to many other Internet platforms, incredibly immune to misinformation. McDowell and Vetter are less concerned with tracing these successes, however, only quickly reviewing them and focusing much more on how they construct certain systematic exclusions. Exclusions are, of course, inherent to the encyclopedic and archival project, which “cannot include and preserve everything” (p. 48). But it is worth understanding how they reify certain sets of knowledge over others. Policies around reliability put a primacy on written sources, to the invalidation of oral knowledge traditions. Those around notability discount topics where there are few sources accessible to editors, either because they don’t exist or they are hidden behind paywalls. Notability is also often leveraged to exclude biographies about women, who have to be more notable than the average man’s biography in order to pass the same requirements, which are evaluated by the majority-male editing community.

In chapter 4, McDowell and Vetter turn from content exclusions to how the community excludes certain types of editors. New editors are often subject to strict gatekeeping that can result in their work getting deleted. Women and people of color often face outright harassment. Wikipedia is technically open for “anyone to edit,” a form of what McDowell and Vetter identify as passive inclusion. However, the site’s policies do not serve a diverse community of editors, making it harder for some to contribute than others and excusing bad behavior with the dictate to “assume good faith” (p. 84). Active participation, on the other hand, would encourage new editors, striving to make them feel welcome and building on, rather than reverting—or deleting—their work.

Some projects organized around editing Wikipedia work hard at this sort of active inclusion, like the Women in Red Project and Black Lunch Table. These are movements with a specific information justice mission to improve the representation of women and Black artists on the encyclopedia, respectively, who build communities to support new editors. The book is at its best when it advocates for this type of work, especially for the Wiki Education Foundation, which encourages the use of editing Wikipedia as a pedagogical tool in a mutual benefit to both the student and the encyclopedia. Professors interested in implementing such an assignment will find this book an inspiration and a handy aid as they navigate Wikipedia’s complexities.

McDowell and Vetter conclude their book with a summary of the expanse between Wikipedia’s ideals and the site’s reality. They diagnose these issues, in part, as the repercussions of its original ideals: The issues are “due to the limitations of those who envisioned and persist because of a myopic view of knowledge production based in these techno-utopian ideals” (p. 90). Because Wikipedia is ever a work in progress, a constant “epistemology in process” (p. 25), the authors find solace in the last of the five pillars:

“There are no firm rules” (p. 105). They compellingly argue that Wikipedia’s greatest potential is in its ability to change, not just by updating content, but by reinventing policies about what it means to know something, how to record that knowledge, and, even, what we should know.

Throughout their book, McDowell and Vetter often assume a familiarity of Wikipedia’s prominent place in the information environment. Readers who quibble with this assumption will find their concerns sparsely addressed. For those who remain unconvinced about Wikipedia’s importance in our Internet ecosystem, they will be better served by José van Dijck’s (2013) *Culture of Connectivity*. For those who are still not sure that Wikipedia actually works, Amy Bruckman’s (2022) *Should You Trust Wikipedia?* will be a more helpful review. Others might find the celebratory collection of essays in *Wikipedia @ 20* (Reagle & Koerner, 2020) helpful for a wider look at the Wikipedia community. McDowell and Vetter add to this growing bibliography of Wikipedia research, distinguishing themselves with a focus on the particular ways the site fails its ambitions. Those invested in the improvement of information environments, whether in the classroom, as an activist project, or as a research topic, will find McDowell and Vetter’s book a clear guide to one of the most important informational resources available.

### References

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