Mapping and bridging the gender gap: an ethnographic study of Indian Wikipedians and their motivations to contribute

Extended Abstract

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ABSTRACT

In 2017, the first comprehensive gender mapping of Wikipedia was carried out and its results were presented at several Wikimedia conferences. Following the premises of that work, our paper is an outcome of a preliminary ethnographic study on the issue of gender gap in participation in India, featuring narratives of Wikipedians from the across the country. The aim is to trace their motivations for contributing on Wikipedia, what they identify as the barriers to participation, and their suggestions for bridging the gap. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with Wikipedia contributors from India constitute the primary sources used in the study.

KEYWORDS

gender gap, participation, motivation, outreach, India

INTRODUCTION

The constant expansion of Wikipedia, both in terms of increasing data in the English-language version as well as the number of world languages it is available in, means that there are users worldwide who are using the platform to disseminate information. And yet, there have been persistent complaints that the content creators are overwhelmingly male. This paper will present a preliminary ethnographic study addressing the issue of gender gap both in terms of content and participation, featuring narratives of Wikipedians from India (with focus on women contributors). Who are they and what are their backgrounds? What are the topics they are covering? Do their gendered postcolonial subjective positions influence their choices when contributing to Wikipedia? The aim of this study is to trace their motivations for communicating using the platform of Wikipedia, and their participation in events and programmes like edit-a-thons and WikiProject Women which bring the issue of gender disparity to the foreground. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with key Wikipedia contributors from India will constitute the primary sources used in the study.

Wikipedia has historically been dominated by male editors, although the trends are changing slowly. The proportion of Wikipedia editors who identify themselves as women is between 9 - 22 percent [1]. Women face many barriers in discovering and editing Wikipedia such as lack of internet access, lack of discretionary time, lesser internet skills [2], less self-confidence [3-5], real or perceived harassment, lack of role models, inability to withstand Wikipedia's polemical culture and double standards towards women editors [6, 7]. Gender bias in Wikipedia is not just restricted to participation but spills over to the content of articles [8]. Women and men are presented differently in Wikipedia's articles [8]. Wikipedia's articles have been found to suffer from inadequacies where articles about men are disproportionately more central than those about women [9]. Thus, one could argue, a woman's existence in the digital world is still determined by her connections with men.

THE ISSUE

Gender gap in content has already been studied/evaluated mainly in English Wikipedia, from a global perspective. The same problem in Indian language Wikipedias merits further studies; but this short research does not focus on that. The other major issue arising from the literature is gaps in and barriers to participation. Research on this issue is still at a nascent stage. Recently, in 2017, Rosie Stephenson Goodknight, a well-known American Wikipedian carried out the first global gender mapping project for Wikipedia, where she interviewed 65 women Wikipedians from around the globe (representing 29 countries and 26 languages). From her research, the following themes emerged: gender is culture-specific; issues of inclusion and gender fluidity are complex; implicit biases exist in society and they create a false sense of neutrality; importance of acknowledging various degrees of participation and not creating a hierarchy; narrating own stories through women's voices and countering bias [10].

Given that both authors are Indian women with a strong interest in issues of gender, technology and society, the choice of India as the focus country was an obvious one. The authors were interested to find out how these various issues appear and are negotiated within the Indian context. Here it must be mentioned that there were a

couple of Indian respondents in the 2017 research, but this study is the first attempt at a comprehensive gender mapping in Wikipedia community in India. According to a 2012 survey, only 3% of Wikipedia editors from India were women (11). However, as a Cisco forecast in 2017 suggested, internet penetration in India is projected to increase sharply by 2021, from 28% to 59% of the population; which means that more women are likely to access to the internet and subsequently to Wikipedia (12). In this context, it is even more important to understand the motives for Indian women to contribute to Wikipedia, the barriers faced by them and the consequences thereof. Inspired by the 2017 gender mapping project and intrigued by the foreseeable consequences of large-scale digitization in Indian society, we came up with the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the motivations for Indian women to contribute to Wikipedia?

RQ2: What are the real and perceived barriers to participation for women in the Indian context?

RQ3: How are they addressing the issues of bridging the gap?

METHOD

As our paper is intended as a pilot study on gender mapping in the Indian context, we decided to employ qualitative methods for data collection. A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared to probe each research question in detail. Respondents were chosen from various academic backgrounds, different regions of India, contributing to different language versions, of various age groups, existing Wikipedians as well as ones who have stopped contributing; Wikipedians working on various aspects such as content creation, outreach and specific projects. Since the focus is on gender gap, we felt that it would be more inclusive to collect some reflections of male Wikipedians alongside women (the ratio of female to male is about 4:1). We must also clarify here that when we talk about gender in this paper it is mainly about the female/male binary. (As we learnt from one of our interviewees, issues of LGBTQ inclusivity are just starting to be taken up and a pilot project has been initiated with grants from the community to design toolkits to address this problem in India.)

As one of the authors is an active Wikipedian herself, the first point of contact was established by her through electronic mails. At this point, we have carried out five interviews, with another five being scheduled in the upcoming weeks. Interviews so far have lasted between 45 minutes to 90 minutes and have been carried out on Skype as well as in a couple of cases, face-to-face. In two cases, they were carried out in Indian languages, Bangla and Malayalam and then translated. They have been recorded and/or extensive notes have been taken during conversations. The responses have been collated into categories like 'barriers', 'motivations', 'bridging gaps' with reference to the research questions. All participants gave informed, written consent to participate in this study.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

At this stage, we have already carried out five interviews to make sense of the motivations (four female, one male respondent) to contribute, as well as to understand their perceptions of gender bias on Indian Wikipedia space (Wikipedia exists in 17 Indian language versions). Our findings relate strongly to the issues that emerged from the 2017 gender mapping study and also point out unique Indian problems which create barriers for women's participation, and what is being done (and can be done) to bridge these gaps. Further interviews have been scheduled over a period of the next two months.

Barriers

During the interview sessions, the most recurring theme that emerged was women's lack of discretionary time for contributing to Wikipedia. A number of Indian women are housewives who mostly undertake all the household chores and have too little leisure time. Therefore, they prefer to engage in 'lighter' activities that provide entertainment such as watching TV and surfing on social media rather than take part in intellectual work such as editing Wikipedia. In case of working women, they have the double responsibility of job and household chores, due to which they don't prefer to spend any time on volunteering. While the internet use of younger women is monitored by (mostly male) parents, they are often permitted to use the internet only for study purposes. Due to this, they have less discretionary time online, keeping them from participating in platforms like Wikipedia. Older women, on the other hand, generally lack the technical skills to use the internet, and therefore cannot contribute to Wikipedia. Many women, regardless of their age, do not possess devices (laptops, mobile phones) compared to men of similar age groups and socioeconomic status. When a shared device is present at the household, the use of it is mostly dictated by an elder male family member, and oftentimes male members get to use it more frequently than females. Women also face restrictions in traveling, especially during the night and to farther locations from their hometown, which keeps them away from conducting and participating in outreach events aimed at women.

Due to their upbringing where men are preferred over women in the family for allocating shared resources, several women have less self-confidence and poorer leadership skills. This in turn creates an internal barrier for editing Wikipedia, where women constantly question their editing skills, despite their good knowledge and writing skills. Since women do not take up leadership positions in outreach activities or administrative roles, there are fewer role models which newcomer women editors can relate to. This in turn makes them perceive Wikipedia as a 'male space' and dampens their motivation to edit. At times, the feeling of isolation in the male space makes some women to stop editing and pursue other fun activities. Some women have been hurt by the toxic culture where they were victims of harassment. When they were harassed by notable members of the community, sometimes including use of threatening language, and when they got little support from others to deal with the harassers, their passion to contribute decreased

considerably. The emotional labour involved in pursuing the fight against misogyny on Wikipedia drained their spirit. In some cultures, women's contributions are scrutinized and challenged more than that of their male counterparts. When such a behaviour is questioned, they are often patronized, talked down or silenced.

Other barriers that keep both women and men from editing Wikipedia are the lack of adequate support for typing tools, poor maintenance of fonts in Indic languages and the higher learning curve required in learning to type in Indian languages. Some people do not consider editing Wikipedia because they do not know that it is an editable space or perceive that their contributions are not worthy enough to feature on an encyclopedia or imagine the consequences of being harshly criticized by experienced editors for inaccurate facts or poor writing skills. The fear of embarrassment in a public platform like Wikipedia keeps some people from participating there.

Motivations

Despite these barriers, several women we interviewed continued to contribute because of their commitment to Wikipedia's founding principle of democratizing knowledge or because they perceived that it was important for them to share their knowledge with the world. For most women, the exciting part was the sharing of knowledge and stories in their mother tongues, which they perceived as useful for people who cannot understand the English language version of Wikipedia. Some others are excited about sharing other forms of knowledge, such as audio clips and photographs. One interviewee edited Wikipedia for advancing women's rights by contributing to articles related to gender violence while another interviewee wrote Indian women's biographies thereby making them more visible and accurate. Knowledge from the global south is mostly oral, and one interviewee was motivated by the idea of bridging the knowledge gap between oral and written histories. One interviewee mentioned that they have a feeling of satisfaction after contributing to Wikipedia. Some participants cared deeply about their fields of expertise or interest that they thought that it was their duty to share knowledge in this subject area to the wider world. One interviewee was dedicated to increasing the proportion of articles about India in the Wikiverse. For some, Wikipedia was a trial ground where they could hone their writing skills, and outreach sessions were where they could exercise their management and administration skills.

Bridging gaps: What can be done?

Bridging the gender gap should be a two-pronged strategy: recruiting new women editors and retaining the existing ones. Several interviewees agreed that editing workshops and similar outreach events are a good way to attract women editors. While there can be editing workshops aimed at newcomers, more experienced editors can organize regular meetups to edit together on topics of shared interest. The workshops shall ideally be led by women, so that newcomers can identify female role models, guides and mentors. Therefore, more women should be trained to become leaders. Some outreach events in India end up as events for solidarity for a cause, rather than for recruiting and sustaining

women contributors. Therefore, it is important to evaluate them with metrics regarding participation. Misogyny is common in tech spaces, so there is a need for sensitization to be a more inclusive and considerate to others. As tech spaces become more inclusive, more diversity can be attracted in and more stories shall emerge. Outreach activities are best done in a university setup, with students as the main benefactors. Many mothers use Wikipedia for helping their children with their homework, who might as well be interested in contributing for giving something back to Wikipedia for the benefits they derive. The unchanneled potential of mothers should be tapped for Wikipedia. For existing editors, support groups are a good solution for keeping them active. These groups can provide support also in issues of harassment. For those who cannot contribute because of the technical barriers, the solution is to make the editing interface simpler, less cluttered and easy to navigate through.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the five interviews carried out so far, at this stage, we can present a working conclusion. The Indian society poses specific socio-cultural challenges which hinder participation of women not only from contributing to Wikipedia but also accessing the internet. Because of implicit and explicit biases in the society, women, even when they have internet access, get to spend lesser discretionary time online than their male counterparts. Traditional gender roles are still strong in the Indian society and these need to be constantly overcome by women who participate in online spaces. However, Indian women are contributing on Wikipedia to tell their own stories, in multiple languages, filling in gaps of knowledge regarding topics from Global South, despite the barriers that hinder their work. Retaining women contributors is as important as getting new individuals; and sensitizing a predominantly male community is the need of the hour, as several barriers faced by women are the direct outcome of a masculine tech culture. Further issues are likely to emerge with more testimonies from interviewees.

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