ARTICLE

Attempting to Balance Wiki-Feminism: A Case Study

Walter Bruno

There has been a long culture war over the validity of *Wikipedia* for research. Many university departments banned it as a primary source starting around 2007, but many others still allow it as a heuristic prompt.[1] Certainly, we know that students are still going to *Wikipedia* and dabbling in it. This reflects a recent gain in *Wikipedia* status; if searching a topic on Google, one is first directed to the *Wikipedia* entry for it. This article builds upon recent debates over *Wikipedia*, by focusing upon the ways in which some *Wikipedia* content—that relating to identity politics—is not only written, but edited and influenced by political camps.

Initially, I report on my own attempts to revise content for two articles appearing in *Wikipedia*'s English database. My goal was to correct perceived imbalances in articles that dealt with gender politics or figures within gender politics. In those attempts I was trying to enhance historical accuracy, counter self-promotion by celebrities, or contextualize and counter feminist bias in the interpretation of texts. After making editorial changes, I "saved" them to the database and they appeared online. In the case of the first edit of the first article, my changes were "undone" within hours. I made a second attempt the same day, which, again, was rapidly undone.

In a similar editing exercise involving a second *Wikipedia* topic, my revision was rejected within twenty minutes and described as "malicious" and "vandalism" in a message left for me by the editorial "volunteer." Here are the details.

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[1] "Several US Universities Ban Wikipedia as Primary Source," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 4, 2013, http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Several_US_universities_ban_Wikipedia_as_primary_source.

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Catharine MacKinnon

In 2010, I read the *Wikipedia* entry for Catharine MacKinnon, the American academic who has made her reputation as an anti-pornography feminist and theoretician.[2] The entry presented MacKinnon in flattering terms and much of it read like a promotional text.[3] Yet MacKinnon is a controversial figure.

Within organized feminism, MacKinnon has been attacked for being anti-liberty and anti-sex. The attacks have come from civil libertarians, but also from gay and lesbian militants, the latter being significant consumers of pornography—as one *Wikipedia* survey suggests.[4] Along with Andrea Dworkin, MacKinnon had helped generate anti-pornography legislation in at least two national jurisdictions; in one ironic consequence, Dworkin's own books were banned from Canada on the basis of laws that she and MacKinnon had spawned. By 2010, the MacKinnon page began to cover this controversy. However, still omitted from the *Wikipedia* page was a far more public and polarizing crisis in MacKinnon's career, her role in the Karla Homolka case.

Karla Homolka

Karla Teale Homolka was the bride of Paul Teale Bernardo, a serial rapist who, in the early 1990s, was accused of killing young women in the Canadian province of Ontario. The killings were particularly odious, sustained rape-murder and torture. Homolka was Bernardo's accomplice and a co-accused. Yet Catharine MacKinnon offered strategic help in preventing the public from fully comprehending Homolka's role.

In 1993, Homolka had a hearing that lasted only a few hours. Among the major controversies surrounding the hearing was a ban on publishing the details. The media had been covering the investigation of other crimes committed by Bernardo in a different municipality; now they were banned by

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[2]"Catharine MacKinnon," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 19, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catharine_MacKinnon.

[3]Sample statement on the MacKinnon *Wikipedia* page: "MacKinnon understands epistemology as theories of knowing and politics as theories of power." This is rather like saying that MacKinnon understands rain as wet and sun as hot.

[4]"Feminist Views of Pornography," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 4, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_views_of_pornography.

the court from reporting the newsworthy acts being alleged in Homolka's case.[5]

Homolka had depicted herself as a battered wife and victim of Bernardo. The police accredited this theory (one instance of battery is verified) to get her to talk. As a result, Homolka obtained a plea bargain, which prompted the brief court appearance and her conviction on the reduced charge of manslaughter. Ultimately, she was out of prison in twelve years.

What no one except Homolka's lawyer knew at the time was that the criminal pair had videotaped themselves committing the crimes (including the murder of Homolka's sister). Homolka's lawyer availed himself of his rights as defense attorney and hid the videotapes from the prosecutors. Only after Homolka's hearing was over did the videotapes emerge—revealing a Karla who was an eager participant, up to and including the assault on her sister.

As Bernardo's trial loomed, an effort led by the deceased victims' families was made to suppress any diffusion of the tapes, particularly via the broadcast media, but also in print accounts. This increased the ire of the media and of the Bernardo defense team, who hoped that the tapes would undermine the theory of the case against Bernardo, by illustrating Karla's participation.

Catharine MacKinnon and the Homolka Case

Catharine MacKinnon played a key role in this drama. As Stephen Williams reports, MacKinnon was called upon by the prosecutorial team and by the victims' families to view the tapes for assessment.[6] She advised the prosecutors on how to use the tapes to convict the husband—without jeopardizing the fate of his guilty wife. Key to MacKinnon's approach: the assertion that Homolka was not an agent of any crime, but an unwilling "victim" of an abusive spouse.

It should be noted that MacKinnon was among the few to have seen tapes of Homolka enjoying the rape-murder of two, perhaps three women. Yet, instead of naming this as depravity, MacKinnon cloaked it in ideology and victim terminology. We have no access to the prosecutorial processes;

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[5]Paul Trout, "Crash-Test Dummies: Canada's Experiment with Free Speech," accessed March 30, 2012, http://mtprof.msun.edu/spr1995/trout.html.

[6]Stephen Williams, *Karla: Pact with the Devil* (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2003), 341.

however, circumstantial evidence suggests that MacKinnon's intervention had an effect: the prosecutors dropped their plan to lay supplemental charges against Homolka—charges based on the tapes.

That still left the controversy over media coverage of the new evidence. MacKinnon claimed that releasing the tapes would be dangerous to the public, asserting that such materials were by definition "pornographic"; violent pornography would stimulate other perpetrators to commit other crimes. In the end, the judge restricted viewing of the tapes to all but the jury, witnesses, and to court officials in the Bernardo trial. Only the soundtracks could be played to press and court onlookers.

The Canadian media was infuriated by this new veil of secrecy; it violated the public's right to follow the trial through reporters' eyes. It was also a continuation of the campaign to shroud what had become an internationally noticed case. As early as December 1993, editorials campaigned against the various walls surrounding the case.[7]

Ultimately, Bernardo was sentenced to life imprisonment, Homolka avoided the murder charge, and the truth of her role was not revealed until both offenders had been sentenced. In the ensuing furor, over three hundred thousand Canadians signed a petition to revoke Homolka's plea bargain. Thus, MacKinnon's activities in Canada seem to have been quite controversial.

MacKinnon, Homolka, and Wikipedia

Until recently, not a shred of the Homolka narrative had appeared in MacKinnon's *Wikipedia* entry. What *had* appeared, as coverage of "controversy," was the arcane debate within gender-feminism over whether smut was positive, negative, or even valid for debate among postmodernists.[8]

On September 4, 2010, as noted, I attempted to add references to the Homolka-Bernardo case to MacKinnon's *Wikipedia* entry. I had made a previous effort in 2007. On that earlier occasion I posted a summary of the narrative to appear under the first paragraph. Unfortunately, *Wikipedia* allows for the obliteration of new edits by providing a function that "saves" a previous version while erasing the new one. After an extensive search, I have concluded that my edit was overwritten to make it disappear.

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[7]Trout, "Crash-Test Dummies."

[8]"Talk: Catharine MacKinnon," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 19, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk: Catharine_MacKinnon.

By 2010, however, *Wikipedia* seemed more likely to allow versions to stand inside the editing record, so I tried again. My short paragraph outlined the case, asserting that MacKinnon had bolstered the fortunes of Homolka (mistakenly spelling it "Homulka," as the name is pronounced).[9]

My change was taken down almost instantly. I made a new attempt the same day.[10] That, too, was quickly reversed. It is true that my first attempt contained a chronology of MacKinnon's role that cannot now be verified due to the disappearance of an Internet source, and that my retry contained several polemical statements. However, both attempts forced into the sun the fact that this scholar, so fulsomely praised by *Wikipedia*, had played a role in a perceived miscarriage of justice.

The odd thing was—and still is—no one was curious about this. Although the trail of changes existed within *Wikipedia*'s Versions and Talk annex, nobody chewed on it. Therefore, rather than make a fourth attempt, I decided to wave a red flag at the authorities.

On September 15, 2010, I posted an alert to Wikipedians about the deletions:

> MATERIALS CENSORED: Materials documenting MacKinnon's support for Canadian serial/thrill-killer Karla Homulka have been removed. Researchers will have to go to an authentic encyclopedia for the full story.

As expected, this too was instantly pulled. Like the other 2010 attempts, it is visible within the Versions and Talk annex.[11]

On the Talk pages that followed, impressive debate raged about how uncritical the article was toward MacKinnon and how it downplayed her ideological challengers. Here's a sample:

> [A] whole section of "accolades" by admirers, by Cass Sunstein, but absolutely no mention of criticism of MacKinnon, much less a section? Give me a break! MacKinnon is one of the single most controversial legal thinkers of our day.

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[9]Google would have offered the correct spelling as a search option.

[10]"Talk: Catharine MacKinnon: Difference between Revisions," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 30, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Catharine_MacKinnon&diff=prev&oldid=382930179.

[11]"Talk: Catharine MacKinnon: Difference between Revisions," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 30, 2011, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Catharine_MacKinnon&diff=435217240&oldid=385033101.

The entry is extremely biased. Are her critics even mentioned? What about the fact that they call her a "Feminazi"?…Even many of her fellow leftists detest her legal philosophy.

This whole article reads like it was written by McKinnon herself.[12]

As early as November 2010 a banner echoing this disgruntlement was posted atop the MacKinnon page disavowing the entry's "neutrality" and admitting that the contents were in dispute. Certainly, adulation of MacKinnon was contested, particularly by gay-lesbian activists, who now enjoy deference among Wikipedians[13] and whose organized editorial lobby I detail below. At any rate, the walls around the encomium seemed compromised.

I noticed this in March 2012. On March 30, I decided to test the strength of the new unrest—and again confront the taboo by posting a fifth attempt to document *Regina v. Homolka*.

Wishing to conduct an intertextuality play and to weigh the transience of Internet material against the persistence of print, and having just finished a draft of the essay you are reading, I determined to paste paragraphs 6 to 16 of that draft into the MacKinnon page (adding paragraph 12 two days later). To conform to encyclopedia rhetoric, I changed a few adjectives that would need to be less definitive or judgmental.

Within minutes, my March 30 insert was tagged as having a "possible BLP [biography of living person] or vandalism issue" within the History tab. Two days later, a "mentor" quibbled with random phrases. Then, on May 12, the counterattack began, with large-scale cutting and rephrasing. Prominent cuts were paragraphs 12 and 13. Paragraph 12 had noted MacKinnon's missed opportunity to inflect the clemency naively granted to Homolka. Paragraph 13 reported on how the prosecution backed away from pressing new charges against Homolka. There were other changes, all reflecting a trend toward mitigating Homolka's guilt.[14]

Then, on October 19, 2012, all subtlety was abandoned, and the entire report on the Homolka affair was wiped out. In its place was the pristine

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[12]"Talk: Catharine MacKinnon: Difference between Revisions," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 30, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Catharine_MacKinnon&diff=next&oldid=314285064.

[13]See "Lesbian-Feminism," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 29, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesbian_feminism. The entry does admit that one lesbian-feminist proposal—to commit "male genocide"—is "extreme," but also accepts it as one possible feminist outcome among many, and claims that the theory has given rise, not to hate speech, but to "a flourish of scholarship and literature dealing with whether men are really necessary."

[14]"Catharine MacKinnon: Difference between Revisions," *Wikipedia*, accessed May 13, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Catharine_MacKinnon&diff=492725945&oldid=4921077062-.

encomium for MacKinnon, similar to what we had read in 2010. Somewhere inside the History tab I found a record of the deletion. On it, the editor wrote the following: "(There are no cites for that entire section. It appears to be something personal in tone. I'm unsure as to where the information came from. So I deleted it.)"[15] It wasn't true, of course: one primary source had been cited in my insertion. No matter; the MacKinnon page had had its airbrushing.

An Article Named *Streetcar*

The second *Wikipedia* entry I reviewed focused on Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*.[16] The work is an important landmark in American drama, not only for its impact on theater and popular culture, but for its subject matter. When it opened in the late 1940s, the play was considered frank and suggestive.

Blanche DuBois

Of particular interest is Blanche DuBois, one of America's great theatrical creations. A fallen woman with a semi-aristocratic background, Blanche has inherited her family's plantation in the Deep South, but watched it slip into ruin. Because of character flaws, she's in difficult straights with town officials and now travels as a penniless exile. As the play begins, she arrives at her sister's home in a poor section of New Orleans.

What makes Blanche powerful, for her period, is her overt sexuality. A high school teacher, she has been caught in a scandalous relationship with one of her students and fired. She's also the town tramp, taking up residence with strangers at a cheap hotel, all under the eye of townsfolk. She was once married, to a closeted homosexual to whom she was physically attracted. Her husband later commits suicide when his secret is revealed, much to the scorn of his wife.

For all these reasons, we are interested in Blanche as a sexual being and an outlaw, indeed as a female predator, something extraordinary for the American stage. She is the reverse of conventional femininity. Although very much the Southern belle, she is also lustful: she tries to seduce the

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[15]"Catharine MacKinnon: Difference between Revisions, Revision as of 01:43, 19 October 2012," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 3, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Catharine_MacKinnon&diff=518620832&oldid=508553113.

[16]"*A Streetcar Named Desire* (play)," *Wikipedia*, accessed March 21, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Streetcar_Named_Desire_(play).

paperboy, then tempts a friend of her sister's family, and finally taunts and teases Stanley Kowalski, her highly sexualized brother-in-law.

Blanche's teasing—particularly of Stanley—is part class warfare, part flirt. She claims to abhor the man as a "Polack" and a lout—although she herself is an alcoholic and déclassée. Pretending to find him repulsive, she is obsessed with viewing him half-naked in the apartment, a concern to which she returns many times in dialogue. As Williams has hinted, his Streetcar is named *Desire*.

In the end, Stanley uncovers her scandalous past and calls her bluff. He then forces himself onto her, committing an assault. The play has told us why, that is, why assault is both inevitable and consistent with the characters. This is the confrontation that the characters themselves have prepared.

Blanche DuBois and Wikipedia

Informed readers of *Wikipedia* will want all of that passion, frustration, and ambiguity included in the play's summary. Yet none of it appears in the "approved" *Streetcar* page. On the contrary, Blanche is depicted as frail and desexualized:

> [Stanley] dominates [his wife] in every way and is physically and emotionally abusive. Stella tolerates his primal behavior as this is part of what attracted her in the first place; their love and relationship are heavily based on powerful—even animal-like—sexual chemistry, *something that Blanche finds impossible to understand*.[17] (emphasis added)

This points to a gender-feminist reading of Blanche as perhaps fallen, but also as pathetic and innocent. This seducer of paperboys is the unqualified victim of men. She has no agency in her misfortune—certainly not with regard to Stanley Kowalski.

Further, the entry describes Stanley as soulless, animal-like, a rapist who takes advantage of the mentally ill Blanche, perhaps because she's female. Stanley is the author of Blanche's downfall and we read nothing about Blanche's provocative behavior:

> [Stanley's] attempts to "unmask" her are predictably cruel and violent. In their final confrontation, Stanley rapes Blanche, which

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[17]Ibid.

results in her nervous breakdown. Stanley has her committed to a mental institution.[18]

On March 19, 2012, I edited the "Plot" section of the *Streetcar* page to provide scholarly depth and non-feminist nuance. My edit survived for all of seventeen minutes on the Internet.

"Editing" as Content Control in *Wikipedia*

Several factors can influence content within a reference work. Disputes arise in every field of enquiry. Some are well documented, some are not. Some involve consensus, some do not. The editor is careful not to exaggerate minor claims and admit quibbles; he must remain neutral and open-minded. Serious attempts to document contraries should be mentioned, along with context.

Orthodoxies and prejudices certainly exist. These can be divided into two categories that I have named *devolutionary* and *evidentiary*. Devolutionary prejudices involve the impulse to be interested in only what interests you. For example, a woman writing about Babe Ruth might be more interested in his alleged womanizing than in any scientific breakdown of his batting technique. She might even color the Babe's reputation somewhat. Evidentiary prejudices, however, try to survey *all* materials with a view to *selecting* among them.

Examining Devolutionary Prejudices

In terms of devolutionary prejudices, it is helpful to consider George Bragues's 2009 paper, "Wikiphilosophizing in a Marketplace of Ideas: Evaluating *Wikipedia*'s Entries on Seven Great Minds."[19] Bragues surveys *Wikipedia* main entries for seven philosophers: Aristotle, Plato, Immanuel Kant, René Descartes, Georg W. F. Hegel, Thomas Aquinas, and John Locke. In one grid he evaluates how these philosophers have been "covered" by four experts, both in print and on *Wikipedia*. Analyzing for certain base issues that leading philosophers commonly consider, the grid measures *Wikipedia*'s performance for "comprehensiveness" in comparison to these other, leading disciplinary sources.

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[18]Ibid. Actually, no "rape" occurs onstage, but the beginnings of an assault.

[19]George Bragues, "Wikiphilosophizing in a Marketplace of Ideas: Evaluating Wikipedia's Entries on Seven Great Minds," *MediaTropes* 2, no. 1 (2009): 117–58.

Bragues aims to examine *Wikipedia* coverage for quantity, but to avoid characterizing its habits of inclusion or exclusion. Having no such reservations, since my purpose is to examine for bias, I discover a theme in what Bragues reports in terms of what *Wikipedia omits* in its coverage of philosophy.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to construct a qualitative and thematic grid using Bragues's statistics, but we can take away some generalizations. It can be said that *Wikipedia* entries for the philosophers have good coverage of basic ontological and epistemological issues: the nature of form and substance, knowledge versus opinion, and conceptual reality versus sensual appearance. On the other hand, *Wikipedia* completely ignores spiritual issues and the putative creation of a universe, eschews words such as *virtue*, tends to shy away from political issues that liberal campuses find unpopular—euthanasia and slavery, for example, even though antiquity always debated them—and omits any base definition of "justice," "the good," or "the bad."

My observation is that these results are predictable but significant for bias. For those recently educated, and in the postmodern view, morals and ethics are "socially constructed"; they have no cross-cultural value—a view often called "extreme relativism." As Bragues says of *Wikipedia* coverage of Aristotle, "[G]aps come to light when we are brought down to earth and confronted with Aristotle's views on topics relating to human nature and society."[20] That would account for the observed lack of interest in Plato's or Aristotle's thoughts on virtue, or on good versus bad. Similarly, today's scholars don't often fret about God and the creation of any sort of universe. Constricted by political correctness on campus, students seldom discuss slavery and euthanasia either—unless told to do so by an authority figure. And finally, as Bragues points out, students might be afraid to dabble in a debate on mistreating animals, such as the one Descartes initiated.[21]

Evidentiary Prejudices

What of the evidentiary prejudices of *Wikipedia*? They are now documented in various studies. One study treads upon similar ground and eerily echoes the results obtained in my MacKinnon experiment.

In his now-famous exposé of Wiki-editing, Timothy Messer-Kruse described his attempts to update content on a *Wikipedia* page devoted to the Haymarket Trials. He had noticed faulty scholarship—mistakes that had

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[20]Ibid., 128.

[21]Ibid., 140.

taken root and been reproduced in history books, sometimes verbatim, leading to the rise of a martyrology around the participants.[22]

Messer-Kruse is a disciplinary expert, so he made the necessary changes. The response was revealing. First, his correction lasted five minutes on the Web and he was scolded for "not providing reliable sources." As he points out, that was false: he'd been careful to cite. Messer-Kruse was more fortunate than I in that the Wiki-masters actually corresponded with him: "You should not delete information supported by the majority of sources to replace it with a minority view."[23] This is instructive for our discussion: *The truth is what the majority says it is, even if disproved*. But such a majority can turn out to be the weight of those who control the narrative.

Also of interest is the background to this event, the editing of historical documentation. We would need to consider not only the majority scholarship for this event, but also the majority of those passionate about the event who tend to participate in discussions. A touchstone of American labor and socialist culture, the Haymarket Trials involved the victimization of laborers in an infamous case of capitalist repression. They are therefore part of the *sacred texts* of American socialism.

Messer-Kruse describes no fewer than three efforts to edit scholarly input backed by documentation into *Wikipedia* content. His corrections dangerously debunked the received innocence of the trial defendants. Like my own efforts, Messer-Kruse's were all "reversed"; like mine, they drew charges of "vandalism." The last of his interventions—made after he had become a published authority on Haymarket—also failed.

"Monitored Editing"?

As we've seen, *devolutionary* content control is passive, but what about active work—deliberate or organized attempts to monitor *Wikipedia* and to inflect content along ideological lines? Is there evidence of this?

The answer is yes, *massive* evidence! Not only do squads of online interveners clean out the heterodoxy and suppress dissent, but *Wikipedia* is politically slanted. The site that calls itself an encyclopedia is also a highly politicized "community."

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[22]Timothy Messer-Kruse, "The 'Undue Weight' of Truth on Wikipedia," The Chronicle Review, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 12, 2012, http://chronicle.com/article/The-Undue-Weight-of-Truth-on/130704/.

[23]Ibid.

Not only does *Wikipedia* invite the more politicized elements to inflect it, it features and promotes their work and houses their networked subgroups.

Chief vehicles for this are the "Portals" that are officially linked to content pages, some so valued by *Wikipedia* that they are linked on its "Front Page." On May 1, 2012, *Wikipedia*'s front page featured "Society" as a primary portal link for readers to explore.

The Society Portal

Clicking on it took me to a main page of the Society portal.[24] It was interesting to see what topics *Wikipedia* considered "majority" themes within the category called "Society." Feminism dominated many of the links and features. For example, a "*Did you know…*" rubric—a didactic device used to surprise readers with facts, but also to hint that these facts *should be known*—included this question: "Did you know that the Central Committee of the Commission for Organizing the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia included only one woman?"[25]

After absorbing this revelation, I explored further. It was May, and another rubric celebrated four significant May anniversaries—significant, one assumes, for those interested in the topic of *society*:

- 1 May 1776 - Foundation of the Bavarian Illuminati, an Enlightenment-era secret society
- 1 May 1869 - New York Genealogical and Biographical Society elects its first woman member
- 7 May 1964 - U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson first makes reference to the Great Society
- 10 May 1793 - Society of Revolutionary Republican Women officially registered at the Paris Commune[26]

If there is an interpretive filter over these selections, it is perhaps that the story of society should more often than not be seen through the prism of women's role in it.

The Society portal offered yet another link, this time to the page for "Sexual Harassment in the United States," which in turn linked to "Sexual

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[24]"Portal:Society," Talk, *Wikipedia*, accessed May 2, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Society.
[25]Ibid.
[26]Ibid.

Harassment in Education in the United States."[27] Both links were heavily oriented to feminist postures. For example, entries on accredited statistics on "sexual harassment" asserted that the overwhelming majority of female students have been sexually harassed, citing only surveys conducted by pro-feminist organizations: the American Association of University Women and the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education. The same held true for international statistics, citing a British federation, the National Association of Schoolmasters—Union of Women Teachers.

Pursuing its discussion, this page engaged the difficult topic of professors who have intimate relations with their students. This falls within our purview, in light of the earlier discussion of Blanche DuBois, a teacher-predator. Close examination reveals balance issues. The section on teacher-student relations tended to depict males as perpetrators and females as victims. In fact, the model victim was Naomi Wolf, who claims she was the object of an unwanted sexual advance made by a celebrity-male scholar, Harold Bloom.

On another topic, *Wikipedia*'s editors did admit to a "double standard" in the handling of teacher-perpetrators: women offenders tended to be judged less harshly by the courts. This admission stood as an antidote to a generally anti-male page… for exactly the duration of one paragraph-return key, since *Wikipedia* claimed in the next paragraph that

> [i]t has been argued that the effects of pupil-teacher sexual harassment vary, depending on the gender of the student and the harasser. In some states in the U.S., sexual relations between a woman and an underage male did not even constitute statutory rape until the 1970s. Many assert that most boys would be happy to have a teacher show sexual interest in them.[28]

So boys enjoy predatory teachers? The paragraph did conclude by presenting an opposing argument, that male victims may be happy at the time, but suffer trauma later. On the face of it sex-neutral, it was neutral only within one paragraph. If there were a serious attempt to be sex-neutral, would not the editors have acknowledged that *female* students, too, are sometimes keen to be seduced by instructors, and that they, too, "would be happy to have a teacher show sexual interest in them"?

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[27]"Sexual Harassment in Education in the United States," *Wikipedia,* accessed May 2, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_harassment_in_education_in_the_United_States.

[28]Ibid.

The Gay-Lesbian Portal

Gays and lesbians, and gay issues, are well-covered in *Wikipedia*, and enjoy wide spaces within the edit-portal milieu. As mentioned, the LGBT influence surfaced in the discussion of the MacKinnon controversies. Direction on gay issues seems to be centered in an officially-sponsored "*Wikipedia* project" found on the "WikiProject LGBT studies" page.[29]

Promoted inside entries that offer social and political content, this WikiProject is not for casual contributors; it is an organized lobby of *editors*, the people who actually decide what is—and is not—published. A cursory glance at the project page shows how activist and interventionist it is; the page features a *to-do list* for its militants.

Listed among the four "tasks" to be performed by editors of LGBT subject matter (when I accessed the page) was one of particular interest:

Deletion discussions: Sexuality and gender — LGBT-related deletion discussions can be manually added here until such time as the article alert bot service is active again.[30]

We return to "deletion discussions" below; for now, let's examine the general tenor of this sectional front-end.

When accessed on May 1, 2012, the page appeared to be modeled upon gay-advocacy media, pro-gay vehicles such as *The Advocate*. The page said little about editing, chiefly displaying notes and news that sounded like an electoral campaign. An inspirational statement from James Baldwin featured prominently: "Everybody's journey is individual. If you fall in love with a boy, you fall in love with a boy. The fact that many Americans consider it a disease says more about them than it does about homosexuality."[31] In the page's *Did you know…* rubric, the editors slid into a gloat: "Did you know that Anita Bryant's participation in Save Our Children, a coalition working to overturn gay rights ordinances in Miami and other cities in 1977 and 1978, destroyed her career?"[32] In short, this page mirrored the efforts of feminist editors in the Society portal.

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[29]Wikipedia:WikiProject LGBT studies, Project Page, *Wikipedia*, accessed May 1, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_LGBT_studies.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid.

A search for linked articles that might promote *questioning* gay culture, disputing gay myths, or discussing the etiology of homosexuality proved fruitless. Generally, the offering resembled what a local daily might publish during wartime: victories and defeats in gay rights battles, all tallied and noted.

On how people should approach homosexuality, the predominant tone was enthusiasm. Accessing the WikiProject LGBT studies page on May 1, 2012, I noted that it listed the names of fourteen culturally significant homosexuals in history, all born in May. One could also link to a calendar listing gay notables born in each month. This sort of *compensatory culture* has been a staple of gay advocacy since the 1970s, if not earlier. However, one wonders about its inclusion in a site that orients editors of *just another encyclopedia*.

The Winding Editorial Process

It is useful to examine in greater detail how *Wikipedia* is edited. An elaborate protocol, it contains levels and decision-making hierarchies and embraces a universe of controversies too complex to describe here. However, to summarize, it presents the surface illusion of democracy—but one subject to firm control.

Main evidence for this is located within the *content debates* that are recorded within the Talk tabs. Often, these debates flow (or are fed) into special pages that exist independently of Talk. I examine one such debate which involves a move to delete a particular "category of discussion" within *Wikipedia*—one that feminists grew to fear, and wanted removed.

Who Gets to Edit?

Before reviewing that discussion, we need to know who actually does the editing. Basically, a vertical organization of volunteers edits the site. Those at the top are the arbiters, the deans of definition. Customarily, they have served time in lower editorial echelons, climbing to the summit by repetition, doing as many edits as they can.

Editorial decisions are subject to internal debate, even dispute, from readers and the corps of editors. Often there are elaborate online consultations, noisy and chatty. *Wikipedia* also has purging processes to vote an item off the island, so to speak. Finally, there are ways to "remove" an editor by petition.

Volunteer editors bring no credentials with them, no education or training; there are certainly no disciplinary props. One simply has to have a taste for it. The more you edit, the more you're allowed to edit; the more you're allowed, the more power you generate for yourself.

One editor of *Wikipedia* has generously described himself in his User profile, so we'll examine him as a specimen. His pen name is Malik Shabazz—the Islamic handle of Malcolm X. He admits on his "user page" that he holds firm political views, but says he is committed to editing "neutrally," and is "willing to stand for recall" if challenged for bias.[33] *Standing for recall* is a process whereby some editors agree to stand down if they are voted out by petition. I mention "Malik" only because he describes his ascent to the top and because he was part of a debate among editors that merits attention.

How did Malik ascend to "Administrator"? By making more than 62,000 edits in approximately five years. When I accessed his user page, he'd been an administrator for over thirty months, and would be considered senior. I must assume that Malik rose progressively.

The Deletion Debate

The controversy under examination was technically called a "Deletion Debate." In such a debate, someone, usually an administrator, proposes to delete framework material. A key framework issue is taxonomy, or classification; one might debate, for example, whether *Republicanism* should be classified under "political movements" or "models of governance."

Senior editors should handle encyclopedic taxonomy. It is both a pragmatic and cultural-linguistic task. Pragmatically, it establishes naming conventions for the ways in which a society classifies phenomena. These conventions, being conventions, are arbitrary and therefore not debatable: they speed up storage and recall of information, and not much else.

The cultural and linguistic side of taxonomy can be complex. First, taxonomies ask how a given group classifies phenomena at the higher levels. These choices can have meaning for society at large. Second, taxonomy goes in both directions, *reflecting* what's current in a reader-group's mind (by foregrounding one word) and, more ominously, *validating* the naming choice made by a group that sways opinion.

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[33]"User Page: Malik Shabazz," *Wikipedia*, accessed May 2, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User: Malik_Shabazz.

The German National-Socialists understood this well when they refused to call the Jews a religion or a people, and insisted—fanatically—on classifying them as a *race*. All taxonomies that intersect with politics are open to political manipulation.

With that in mind, let's consider one *Wikipedia* debate over taxonomy. This revolves around whether there should be a classification for the phenomenon called misandrists.

Misandrists are people who detest men or whose politics are anti-male. Prior to December 2009, "Misandrists" could be found in *Wikipedia* as a distinct classification, with branching subentries. On December 24, 2009, a debate was scheduled among editors; somebody had proposed deleting Misandrists.

Luckily, the debate, which involved two camps, was logged.[34] Some editors argued that the classification had an established history; since it existed, there had to be a reason for it. In essence, these editors argued against historical revisionism. They also noted that certain well-known, if extreme, feminists had described themselves, in their own texts, as misandrists.

Their opponents objected that we "don't create categories that use subjective criteria to attack people."[35] Failing to define "subjective," or even "attack people," they nevertheless gave examples of this policy: the decision not to establish a classification for "Anti-Semites" or "Misogynists." Here, they seemed to be inventing a unique system for classifying political tendencies, since their analogy with anti-Semites is not valid. Historically, people *have* labelled themselves anti-Semites; two examples are the Austrian anti-Semite parties of the 1890s.

Some of the pro-deletion rationales are worth examining:

- Difficult to apply without BLP issues, and too easy to apply *with* BLP issues. People rarely self-identify using pejorative terms, and using third-party assessments leaves the matter open to conflicting POV [point of view] interpretations.
- [U]sing a pejorative term like this as a category title makes it usable as an attack category, *which carries serious WP:BLP risks.* (emphasis added; "WP" tends to denote "*Wikipedia*" in Wiki-discussions)

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[34]"Wikipedia:Categories for discussion/Log/2009 December 24," Project Page, *Wikipedia*, accessed May 1, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Categories_for_discussion/Log/2009_December_24#Category:Misandrists.

[35]Ibid.

One impression emerges here that dominates all others. These editors are not debating the currency of the word so much as the politics of using it—and more ominously the risks of allowing Misandrists to stay. *People might be castigated as Misandrists, and then go read it on Wikipedia*, they reason; we cannot afford to let that happen.

In 2009, in addition to the problem of offending Dworkinites, they would have had to contend with the rise of "Men's Rights," a critical response to feminism. It was precisely that movement that took up the label Misandrists and flung it at its opponents, making the point that pro-female is often anti-male. In so doing, they pasted a feminist word into an anti-feminist construct, rendering its course through *Wikipedia*, and toward wider audiences, problematic.

Space prevents us from detailing other plunges into similar conclaves for *editorial deletion*. The debates were numerous and colorful, particularly in the social sciences. One, for example, considered a proposal to delete the "Ex-gay People" category and replace it with "People Who Identify as Ex-gay."[36] Such a revision, we assume, covered the risk of admitting the *homosexual-cure* heresy—an embarrassment for editors of *Wikipedia*—and reaffirmed the link between "gay" and "identity," a foundation of Queer politics. In summary, that's what this editing seems to be all about.

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[36]"Wikipedia: Categories for discussion/Log/2009 January 25," Project page, *Wikipedia*, accessed May 1, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Categories_for_discussion/Log/2009_January_25#Category:
Ex-gay_people.