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Becoming Wikipedian women: a sociotechnical history of the Gender Gap Task Force (2013–2023)

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ABSTRACT

The summer of 2014 was a flashpoint of conflict between popular misogyny and popular feminism. While #GamerGate harassment campaigns raged across Reddit and Twitter, the experience of discrimination took on a different character within Wikipedia. One year prior to #GamerGate, Wikipedian women came together to address systemic gender bias on the encyclopedia and created the Gender Gap Task Force (GGTF). Following July 2014, the GGTF WikiProject saw intense contestation between editors who wrestled with the question of how to navigate the incommensurability between misogyny and feminism while creating encyclopedic knowledge. This article demonstrates the complexity of the GGTF's response by theorizing it through a sociotechnical history of its formation as a counterpublic. Drawing on 443 discussion threads from the GGTFs talk pages, and numerous WikiProject pages, news reports, arbitration cases reports, and user pages, I argue that the GGTF played a significant role in making the identity of Wikipedian women legible and legitimate to the broader community. At the same time, the task forces' activism as a counterpublic was significantly curtailed by trolling and harassment. In detailing this account, this article demonstrates how the design of an online community was exploited to support geek hypermasculinity and mobilized to exclude women from shaping the identity of "the Wikipedian."

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Introduction

Wikipedia's historical significance is often hidden below the surface, tucked behind its millions of articles, and buried in the detailed machinations and esoteric discussions of how to produce an encyclopedia. Such squabbles over epistemological minutiae might seem unimportant to its billions of monthly readers. But Wikipedia belongs to the history of encyclopedias, and encyclopedias are media that set out to accomplish an impossible task. By bringing together a society's available knowledge,

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encyclopedists have always run into the problem of forcing incommensurable knowledge systems into the same material space, and therefore expose the fractures, misalignments, and contradictions within and between them.

This was precisely the argument made by one editor of the mid-twentieth century *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He explained that each era has its own encyclopedia that negotiates the "uneasy balance between the death of one age and the birth of another" (Preece, 1965, p. 799). And the result of this balancing act is the creation of new kinds of people; "whole men for Ancient Greece, pious men for Medieval Europe, and free men for the Enlightenment;" and implied that the twentieth century *Britannica* produced scientific men (p. 798; p. 802).

Today, Wikipedia stands in this position as "the most influential encyclopedia" as it constantly shapes and arbitrates "our epistemological reality" (McDowell & Vetter, 2022, p. 3). The most public-facing component of the encyclopedia is the "mainspace," or the collection of articles that are read by millions of daily users. These pages are edited by a coterie of casual users, anonymous editors, prolific Wikipedians, as well as semi-autonomous bots. But Wikipedia is also organized into "11 additional namespaces, which include divisions for user pages, files and their metadata, interface texts, templates, help pages, category pages, reader-friendly portals, article drafts, TimedText for media files, and modules" as well as the "Wikipedia namespace" or "Project namespace" (p. 3). It is in this space that Wikipedians discuss how to produce the encyclopedia and coordinate their efforts.

Writing in 2006, a technology critic and novelist reflected on how this participatory structure was responsible for the newest shift in encyclopedic knowledge. Cory Doctrow argued that while the "*Britannica* tells you what dead white men agreed upon, Wikipedia tells you what live Internet users are fighting over" (Leitch, 2014, p. 87). The assertion here, was that this new encyclopedia replaced men's colonizing knowledge with networked deliberators whose contributions were not limited by gender or race. They were a new kind of encyclopedic people—the Wikipedians.

Despite the radical changes in the relationship between individual experts and amateur crowds, Wikipedia couldn't kick the patriarchal habit. As the communication scholar Joseph Reagle explained, Wikipedia was modelled after "historically male dominated" communities and so it inherited these same social conditions (2010, p. 93). Indeed, the recognition of the centrality of masculine identities within Wikipedia began to crystalize when a survey reported that nearly 87 per cent of Wikipedians were men (Glott et al., 2010), a fact that became known as Wikipedia's egregious "gender gap" (Gardner, 2011). So, despite Wikipedia's desire for utopian participation, the culture of its "homogenous user base" precipitated an absence of "consideration to be radically inclusive for those outside their own demographic" (McDowell and Vetter, p. 83).

The encyclopedia's gender gap and its articulation of "the Wikipedian" are therefore intimately tied to expressions of masculinity. As Judy Wajcman (1991) noted, "technical competence is part of male gender identity," but its different expressions intersect with class divides. For example, "[t]he cult of masculinity revolving around physical prowess is closely associated with shop-floor culture among manual workers," whereas "middle-class men have more power through their possession of abstract and generalizable technical knowledge" (p. 39). In the context of Internet cultures, such

middle-class styles of technicality are inscribed within what Christopher Kelty (2005) defined as "geek culture." But what makes this culture exceptional is that for these people, "writing software and configuring networks are as essential to freedom and public participation as is speaking to a public about such activities" (p. 187). In other words, when combined with computing technologies, geek participants can constitute "recursive publics," a type of social group that not only engage in argument-by-talk, but also "argument-by-technology" (p. 186). In doing so they have the capacity to discursively and materially create a new social existence. Indeed, the outcome of such publics, as Kelty detailed, have been some of the foundational infrastructures and cultures of the web.

However, geek culture has often embraced misogynistic structures and practices that have pushed women out of computing professions (Misa, 2010) and online spaces (Citron, 2009). While not inherent to masculinity itself, the tendency to territorialize the traits of "mastery, control, resilience, lack of emotions, physical strength, bravery, etc." and hegemonically seek "to preserve the conditions of possibility for practices that perform these traits" produces what Jernej Markelj describes as "paranoid masculinities" (2024, p. 101). Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017) nascently defined these intersections of masculinity, geek culture, and paranoia with the term "geek hypermasculinity." Importantly, the geekiness of this masculinity informs a "geek-as-hero" aesthetic that is combined with being a "geek-as-victim" (p. vi). This mentality resonates with what Sarah Banet-Weiser described as the fun-house mirror of popular misogyny; a situation "in which politics and bodies are distorted and transfigured so that men—heterosexual, white men—are the ones who appear to be injured by widespread inequities and structural disparities" (2018, p. 45). However, in the specific case of geek hypermasculinity, this identity is not only "forged by rejecting both feminine-marked culture and constructions as well as the traditional athletic male aesthetic," but preserves the identity through a continual "negative framing of femininity within geek spaces" (Salter and Blodgett, 2017, p. vi). This dual action of forming a masculine identity through the exclusion of feminine genders within public and private spaces underscores the political nature of geek hypermasculinity.

Based on these theories of masculinity, men who are attached to this identity become threatened when other genders engage in similar practices that are territorialized by geeks. In these cases, men may draw their common attention to this situation and form "defensive publics," a discursive formation that positions itself as a marginalized group with the public sphere, but "seek to preserve the ordering of systems of inequality" (Jackson and Kreiss, 2023, p. 103).

These defensive hypermasculine publics took on social and political significance in the 2010s. Attached to the 2014 hashtag #GamerGate was "a campaign of systematic harassment" against women and minority groups and operated as a "backlash against women and their use of technology and participation in public life" (Massanari, 2017, p. 330). While it started on Twitter, this leaderless form of misogynistic trolling spread across different social media platforms (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Hagen, 2023; Mortensen, 2018).

This article details how this geek hypermasculinity took shape on Wikipedia and how Wikipedian women created a counterpublic to demand a more inclusive encyclopedia. When their efforts became visible through the joint attention of

hypermasculine men during #GamerGate, a defensive public emerged to preserve the status quo. But to understand the dynamics between these two groups, it is necessary to consider how geek hypermasculinity was expressed by Wikipedians. During #GamerGate where men created a non-athletic aesthetic of masculinity by "valorizing intellect over social or emotional intelligence" (Massanari, 2017, p. 332), Wikipedians similarly expressed themselves through the aesthetics of rational intelligence, but they did so with the goal of producing neutral forms of knowledge. This commitment is captured by one of Wikipedia's guiding values that requires encyclopedic content to represent a neutral point of view (NPOV). This means that each article represents "all important viewpoints;" an ideal that is problematic since "someone must decide which viewpoints are important enough to include in a given article," and therefore is always a statement of subjective assessment (Leitch, p. 41).

But this focus on neutrality is also expressed at the level of the user. Because users are by default (semi)anonymous and Wikipedia is an open content community, this means that each person's contributions are "judged on their merits" (Reagle, 2010, p. 76) and not their offline identities. As Nathanial Tkacz paraphrases the founder's reasoning, Wikipedian neutrality was designed to allows editors "to work together regardless of their particular point of view" (Chapter 2, 2014). Within this framing, NPOV is not just a content policy, but it is an aesthetic of epistemic interaction between individuals. While NPOV was assumed to be a universalizing way of avoiding discrimination, this form of neutrality also allowed the cultural practices of men to be taken for granted, since it was a common space for men. When other genders like women engaged with the community, it led to the common assessment that while men could continue acting as men, being a Wikipedian meant that a woman should "stop behaving like a woman" (Menking & Erickson, 2015, p. 3).

In both this demographic and cultural context of the encyclopedia, I argue that the identity of "the Wikipedian" resonated with a "hyper" expression of geek masculinity. It combined the technical competence of middle-class masculinity; the paranoid masculinity of defending a heroic status as masters of general knowledge; and this defence included harassing and alienating women within the project while maintaining an aesthetic discourse of neutrality. What was presumed as a neutral identity was clearly not the case.

It is within this environment that the women and allies of Wikipedia's Gender Gap Task Force (GGTF) found themselves. Beginning in 2013, a dedicated group of users created a WikiProject page to discuss gender bias on Wikipedia. In the course of the article, I argue that this situation set the conditions for the GGTF to be recognized as a *counterpublic*—a type of group oriented towards increasing "societal equality" by "invent[ing] and circulat[ing] counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Mansbridge, 2017, p. 104; p. 106, quoting Nancy Fraser). Groups like these exist at the threshold of being both spaces of collective retreat and public presence.

First, counterpublics enable the "withdrawal and regroupment" for marginalized individuals to discover shared experiences of inequality and develop the language to speak about themselves and their collective concerns. Secondly, counterpublics also "function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Mansbridge, p. 106). Within the framework of discourse theory, these activities

of withdrawal and appearance are tantamount to group formation, which is "a process by which some possibilities of identification are put forward as relevant while others are ignored" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 44). This reduction of possibilities emerges by connecting or disconnecting two or more sets of meanings to create new "chains of equivalence" (p. 43). These chains of meaning are also fundamentally *relational*; the formation of a subject is always made legible "because it is contrasted with something that it is not" and is therefore a history of articulation "moments" (p. 43; p. 26).

Through their shared presence and group interventions, the GGTF decoupled Wikipedian identity from the aesthetics of masculine neutrality and reconnected it with the politics of gender. In doing so, their chains of equivalence allowed them to make counterdiscourse arguments-by-talk and arguments-by-technology for why the identity of "the Wikipedian" included women. Both the actions of politicizing Wikipedian identities and the feminist calls for a minority group to expand the democratic practices of the majority threaten some men's identity as hypermasculine geeks. The response was swift and disorienting. The GGTF's talk page not only filled with appeals to minimize these concerns, but editors were harassed across multiple discussions on the site. These events were brought to public attention in news articles by *Slate* (Auerbach, 2014) and *The Atlantic* (Paling, 2015) that addressed the broader reckoning of social media-enabled misogyny.

To make sense of this situation, I ask the following questions. How did the GGTF serve as a counterpublic of regroupment and withdrawal to establish a shared identity and common concerns? Which strategies of social equality did they envision could be enacted within the Wikipedian community? How did the specific process of creating the WikiProject shape both the women's counterpublic and the hypermasculine defensive public? And finally, how did the collective identity of "the Wikipedian" change as a result of the incommensurable encounter between these two publics?

I answer these questions by conducting a sociotechnical history of group formation through the collection and critical interpretation of the digital traces of the task force. This included a close reading of all 3520 signed comments by 268 unique usernames posted to the GGTF project talk page archive from May 2013 to May 2019. Given the networked material of Wikipedia pages, the analysis required additional close readings of WikiProject pages, edit histories, Wikipedia arbitration cases, and news articles.

In following this method, I argue that while the cost of fashioning the GGTF as a visible women's counterpublic was high, the task force developed long-lasting article-creation initiatives that successfully increased the diversity of Wikipedian biographies, increased women's participation, and found institutional legitimacy and support from the Wikimedia Foundation. At the same time, these interventions were shaped by the misogynistic practices of a defensive public. As a result, the conflicts over the GGTF were not only illustrative of the complexity and consequences of #GamerGate in shaping the politics of gender identity of the 2010s web. When interpreted through the encyclopedia's sociotechnical structure, they highlight important transformations of knowledge that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth-century, when feminist and misogynist epistemologies were brought together in the same space of an encyclopedia.

Methodologies and methods

Studying the history of Wikipedia demands paying attention to the sociotechnical construction of digital culture as well as encyclopedias. Within Internet histories, one tradition leans heavily on the *social* in sociotechnical systems. In these cases, historians focus on the role that race, class, gender, and sexuality have in shaping the lived experiences of programmers, activists, and users (Abbate, 2017; McIlwain, 2019). Historians of encyclopedias have also followed this methodology. For example, Frank Kafker (1996) demonstrated how class shaped the content produced by the 150 authors of the French *Encyclopédie* and Gillian Thomas's (1992) collective biography of the of 35 largely upper-class women authors and the women editorial staff of the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. On the other end are histories that focus on the *technical* in sociotechnical systems. Here we find the cultural histories of infrastructures, biographical histories of new media, or historiographies of specific platforms (Helmond & van der Vlist, 2019; Lesage & Natale, 2019; Turner, 2017). This approach resonates with Robert Darnton's history of the French *Encyclopédie* where he developed his canonical "biography of a book" (1979, p. 1).

Bridging these approaches is scholarship that grounds technical changes within their generic and social continuities. Within media studies, this might mean examining the production and circulation of technological myths, digital magazines, or information activism (McKinney, 2020; Natale & Ballatore, 2020; Stevenson, 2015). For book historians, this means understanding how encyclopedias are jointly constructed from shifting intellectual desires and changes in epistemological techniques (Franklin-Brown, 2012; Yeo, 2001). This kind of dual attention has been developed in Heather Ford's (2022) analysis of how Wikipedians established and circulated the fact of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. By closely following the records of Wikipedian editorial activity, she narrated how these traces exist as invaluable objects that aid in the historical interpretation of political and social events.

Studying the history of Wikipedians also raises the question of ethics. As Christian Pentzold explained, Wikipedians have the technical and social skills to shape their own levels of anonymity, and not only understand the public nature of the site (2017, p. 146), but every edit requires the active consent by Wikipedian users to release their content under GFDL or creative common's licenses. Additionally, many figures within the GGTF were also the subjects of mass media news articles and have therefore been described as notable figures of public interest. While a generous reading of these conditions may suggest that all usernames and comments are available to be used, I have only published the usernames of the Wikipedians who are central to the construction and controversy of the task force.

The sociotechnical analysis itself began by using a combination of content and thematic analysis. The corpus was collected by visiting the talk page and downloading the HTML files for all thirteen archives (starting in May 2013) plus the talk page and ending in May 2019 and conducting a close reading of 443 individual threads. Metadata about the edits to these pages were collected from the "history" page and used as a heuristic graph to conceptualize the history of group formation on the GGTF (Figure 1). This timeline begins in 2013 and ends with the task force's self-described "inactive" status in 2023. Due to the contextual nature of online

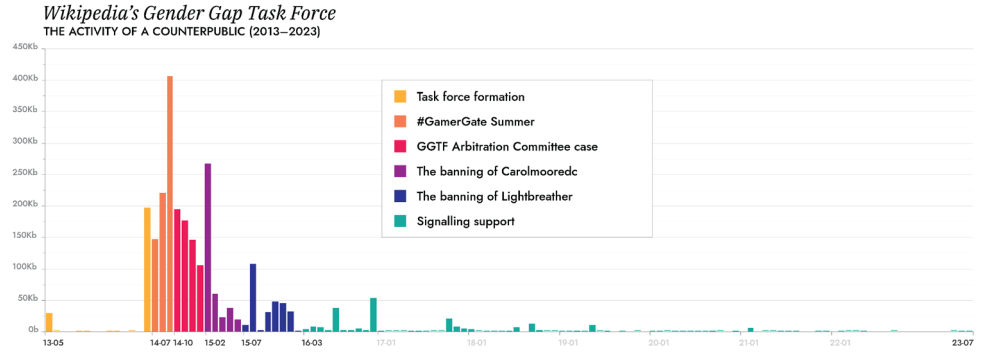

Figure 1. Monthly edits in kilobytes made to the project and talk pages of the GGTF. Edit activity categorized according to situations of collective response.

discussions, I followed David Moats' acknowledgement that discourse analysis will inherently lead to other wikipages and "outside the nominal boundaries of Wikipedia" to other referenced sources (Moats, 2019, p. 14). Additionally, a sample (1 out of every 50 edits) of 11 versions of the WikiProject's main page was examined to see how the identity as a task force was articulated. The collection of archived data occurred in February, May, and August of 2019; revisited again in January and October of 2020; with a final pass in March 2024.

The Gender Gap Task Force

Inheriting the mailing-list (2006–2011)

Even before the 2010 survey reported that most Wikipedians identified as men, Wikipedian women were well aware of this fact. Five years prior, the WikiChix mailing-list was created by women who faced systemic gender bias on the site (Reagle, 2010, p. 92). In many ways, it is unsurprising that Wikipedian women chose to create a mailing-list as a response. Within the history of the Internet, mailing-lists have played a crucial role in organizing and circulating digital culture. While this medium extends the mechanisms of email to include "posting, receiving a digest, subscribing, [and] unsubscribing" to messages from a larger group, it was imagined to "promise an entirely new experience of producing and sharing" (Dieter et al., 2019, p. 254; p. 251). Indeed, women have been creating mailing-lists to challenge male-dominated online spaces since the 1980s and 90s to create an "alternative set of social norms" (Driscoll, 2022, p. 162). These have done so by using the digital traces of "usernames, return addresses, signatures, linguistic markers" (p. 162) and the affordances of moderation to use mailing-lists as women-only spaces.

WikiChix was part of this lineage. But it was met with suspicion by Wikipedia's community. Because it was a women-only space and it was hosted by the Wikimedia Foundation (WMF), it was seen as antithetical to the sociotechnical openness of the encyclopedia (Ral315, 2006). WikiChix countered these claims by explaining that the need for women to defend themselves and explain bias was itself an obstacle to pursuing the goals of the encyclopedia (WikiChix, 2007).

Following the aftermath of the 2010 survey, the Executive Director of the WMF established a different WMF-hosted mailing-list that was emphatically "NOT a women-only list" and designed to "become a space [to] share research and information and tactics for making Wikipedia more attractive to women editors" (Gardner, 2011). While both mailing-lists raised important issues, they were not seen as legitimate spaces of contestation as both were socially and technically outside of Wikipedia's recursive public. It was clear that dealing with the gender gap had to happen from within Wikipedia.

Forming a counterpublic (May 2013–May 2014)

In 2013, a Wikipedian named SlimVirgin made a request on the Countering Systemic Bias WikiProject (CSB) talk page. She argued that while there are WikiProjects for feminism and gender studies, these projects only "focused on articles within its topic area." In alignment with the CSB's goals of addressing "Wikipedia's inherent structural biases," she proposed the idea of creating "a task force to deal with gender bias in all its forms" (Wikipedia, 2004, 2013). With some discussion and no objections to her page creation by the CSB, a task force was created.

Within the year, Amanda Filipacchi of the *New York Times* noticed that women listed under the Wikipedian category of "American Novelists" were being recategorized as "American Women Novelists." This meant that there existed a list of men-only "American novelists" (Filipacchi, 2013). This issue and the revision of the categorization policy served as the interest of a few task force members over the next—relatively quiet—year for the task force. This slow period was brought into sharp relief on June 28, 2014, when SlimVirgin removed much of the technical work completed by the editor Obiwankenobi. A conflict erupted and the talk page became the site of heated debates about protecting edits made by women, the visibility of Wikipedian women, and the consideration of transfolk in terms of gender bias (Wikipedia, 2015a). Some editors were self-identified as feminists while others disliked the term. Some members thought that disclosing one's gender negated NPOV, while others feared that visibility would lead to harassment. There was also the issue of problem definition: did the gap concern articles about women or the women's participation as editors? Importantly, these debates raised the complexity of different women's perspectives and such divergent differences required discussion. This was, of course, the point of the task force put into practice. Weighing in on the debate, SlimVirgin restated her desire for the task force to discuss and track bias within "articles, policies, behaviour, etc." and that she "was hoping this could become a safe space […] a place for women to discuss these issues." She imagined the taskforce as a counterpublic.

The choice to highlight the GGTF as a space for women was subsequently viewed through the funhouse mirror of popular misogyny. "[Y]our continued referencing of 'women' is unhelpful" Obiwankenobi wrote. "You can have off-wiki women-only mailing lists if you like, but especially in a place where many editors don't even declare their gender, attempting to suggest that a space […] is primarily for women goes against the aims of the project […] it's exclusionary." Similar arguments followed, stating that the project should concentrate on content rather than address the low participation

of women and that the meaning of "gender bias" meant a bias against both women *and* men.

As Sarah Banet-Weiser explained about the neoliberalism within popular misogyny, the "insistence on an equal playing field is crucial to the logic of neoliberalism," where the "individual, not gendered or raced but merely a 'person,' is the key subject in this logic. If all individuals are equal, there is no need for specificity of identity; indeed, insisting on this very specificity is precisely what is causing the injury" (2018, p. 62). Importantly, this is precisely the presumption about the neutrality of the Wikipedian, an identity that is deeply connected with neoliberal ideas of openness and individuality (Tkacz, 2014). As such, the response by the detractors demonstrated how deeply embedded the politics of neoliberalism and injured hypermasculinity was for their group identity.

The speed and boldness of the women's next moves was a testament to the necessity to reclaim the task force from these neutralizing discourses. SlimVirgin and Carolmooredc suggested that the task force could help increase women's participation by expanding the project to include a resource section; review the civility and harassment policies; research the interactions between women and administrative boards; learn from the successes of other WikiProjects; and promote the work of women's projects and women editors (Wikipedia, 2015a). In other words, the task force was not just going to be a space for collaborating on articles about women.

This reinforcement of focus was captured in two visible changes. First, SlimVirgin added an image credited to the London Student Feminists and was described as "'Mind the Gap' goes feminist." The file itself was named Mind_the_gap1.jpg and repurposed the familiar icon of the London Underground so that it contained the astrological symbol for women. Second, the talk page held a survey on June 30 to rename the WikiProject from Gender *Bias* Task Force to Gender *Gap* Task Force. During this time, the members created a "Mind the Gap Award," and Carolomooredc manually archived talk page threads that she suggested would give the wrong impression to potential new members. Through each of these steps—the outlining of the project scope, using feminist iconography, renaming of the task force, and the archiving of distracting threads—the members of the GGTF made arguments-by-technology to make their identity as Wikipedian women visible, legible, and a space of feminist action (Figure 2). These arguments had their intended effect. Obiwankenobi apologized for being aggressive and in an act of contrition, made his last comment to the task force. He stated that he "should have listened more and spoken less" (Wikipedia, 2015a). It was an offer of making room for women to determine the shape of the project.

The summer of #GamerGate (July–September 2014)

From the beginning of June to the end of July, the membership of the project almost tripled from 13 to 36. By the end of September, it increased to 59. This uptick in activity and renewed focus ushered in a new era of confidence about the task force. Yet, the very premise of the task force was being questioned by a new group of editors. Some editors questioned whether the gap had any discernible impact on the quality of Wikipedia's content, and more asked if there were further statistics about the gap beyond the 2010 survey. With no new external validation, these detractors argued that any act to close the gap was baseless.

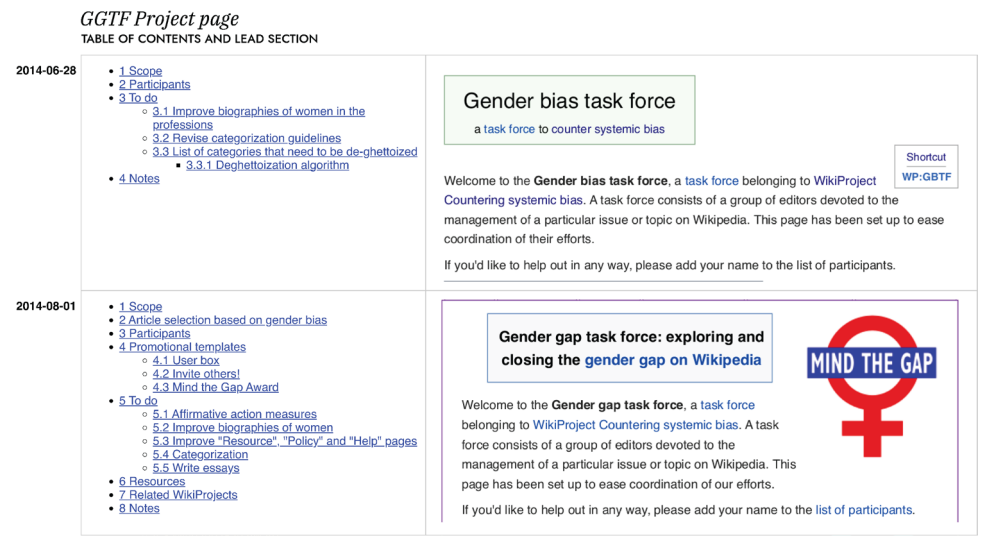

Figure 2. June–August 2014: GGTF members expand the scope of the project and use women-related iconography.

For those who agreed that the gap was a problem, it was clearly a complex issue. The causes seemed to range from toxic individuals, a toxic culture, historical bias, to troubles navigating the interface. Others understood it primarily as a quantitative gap in the number of articles about women and women's topics, or the number of women admin and editors. These discussions were particularly difficult because the multi-dimensionality of the gap was seen, not as evidence of its pervasiveness throughout the community, but as a means to constantly redirect the discussion away from discussing clear actions—a form of trolling that actively disrupt discussions "whilst presenting the veneer of acceptable civility" and is capable of sabotaging "an otherwise productive discussion" (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 28; p. 15). In this sense, hypermasculine geeks not only weaponized Wikipedia's social conventions of "assuming good faith" to block discussions from producing radical actions but also—as McDowell and Vetter have identified of Wikipedia in general—"to create a safer space for gatekeepers, harassers, and other toxic members of the community" (2022, p. 84).

When commentors asked for external evidence of the gap, Carolmooredc suggested that these individuals just wanted to be "spoon fed" the information and estimated that it would take ten to fifteen hours to collect this information (Wikipedia, 2015b). Because of the uncharitable and exasperated nature of Carolmooredc's comment, the purposes of the trolls' politeness were laid bare. Linguistic researcher Claire Hardaker used the term "sealioning" to describe this "process of killing with dogged kindness and manufactured ignorance by asking questions, then turning on the victim" when they become annoyed and retaliate (Stokel-Walker, 2018).

Sometimes this form of sealioning was exacerbated by the targets being "wikihounded;" a type of stalking that consists of a harasser repeatedly confronting and questioning a user's edits on multiple pages. For example, one seemingly innocuous thread started by announcing "I just added my name to the participants list (Wikipedia, 2015a). It was immediately noted that this user had been following a woman editor

from talk page to talk page. The animosity between the two users was immediately established and tensions escalated quickly. As a result, threads that once had valuable discussions about the scope of the project devolved into a swift stream of disruptive comments.

Other forms of disrupting the GGTF were based on delegitimizing the inherent collectivity of the WikiProject. When an editor notified the task force that a biography of a woman was going to be deleted, these actions were policed as suspicious and marked as violating WP:CANVAS and WP:NOTAFORUM; two rules used to reinforce the legitimacy of individual action and to limit the creation of collective editing and decision-making blocs. With the GGTF purposefully designed to gather Wikipedian women together as a "task force," it ran counter to these neoliberal policies.

With the combined scepticism about the gap and the flexibility of its meaning, the key members of the group shifted their discursive tactics by working toward a consensus. One approach was to universalize the problem and point out, as Carolmooredc did, that "[t]his issue doesn't affect only women. It also affects people of ethnic or racial minorities […] older people, experts, academics, etc" (Wikipedia, 2015c). And while the gender gap can be considered an intersectional problem, it was often redefined as a problem for both men and women, harkening back to the earlier demands for inclusiveness and equality with one editor explaining that both male and female editors were driven off by the "same behaviors." By framing the issue in terms of friendliness, it was argued to create a culture that was supportive of new users who, as one user only tangentially noted, "might be women" (Wikipedia, 2015b). Here, Wikipedian women's efforts at group formation were disarticulated. When they attempted to reach a consensus about the gender gap, it became redefined as a friendliness gap. Instead of being able to discuss and address common issues concerning Wikipedian women, consensus-making eroded the political specificity of gender. These moments reflected what Nancy Fraser called the "informal impediments to participatory parity" (1997, p. 78) where, "[s]ubordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard. [They] are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate" (Fraser, p. 78, citing Jane Mansbridge).

Access, ambiguity, and politeness were therefore used as strategic forms of communication to both deny the existence of the gender gap and to take up the energy of GGTF members; all of which redirected and delayed feminist action. Even further, the purpose was to push Wikipedian women to the point where they would transgress Wikipedia's policies on civility—a form of discourse that historically included forms of decorum that have been used to limit the access to the public sphere by marginalized identities (Fraser, 1997, p. 78). Despite efforts to improve the project page and create social norms around discussions that would be acceptable to all parties involved, the task force's social cohesion was effectively destabilized. In the next month, these initial conflicts escalated to a fever-pitch.

Following the Wikipedian conventions about unresolved disagreements, Carolmooredc brought her issues to the attention of the Administrators Noticeboard/Incident (WP:ANI, or ANI), a discussion forum used to address "urgent incidents and chronic, intractable behavioral problems" (Wikipedia, 2019a). On September 4, Carolmooredc requested that an administrator provide a "closing discussion" concerning

the disruptive actions of Eric Corbett, Two kinds of pork, and SPECIFICO (Wikipedia, 2014a). The discussion turned into a request for the three users to voluntarily refrain from editing GGTF pages. This request was not voluntarily adopted and Two Kinds of Pork counter-proposed to "[w]arn Carolmooredc" because she attempted to "silence those that disagree with her." This proposal was closed and subsequently followed with yet another proposal, this time suggesting that Eric Corbett, Two kinds of pork, and SPECIFICO should be banned from the GGTF page.

It is the final comment of this thread that reveals the role that neoliberal neutrality plays in the aesthetic expression of geek hypermasculinity. The real issue at hand was that "there's no such thing as a male or female editor. We are simply editors period"—and there would not have been an issue in the first place "if all editors had chosen to hide [their real life] genders from Wikipedia." Explicitly, some editors did not want Wikipedians to act as women. The closing administrator judged that there was "no consensus" on the issue and reprimanded "that all parties should sort the issue out for themselves like 'rational adults.'"

The ANI judgment was seen as unsatisfactory and subsequently brought to the attention of Wikipedia's founder Jimmy Wales. He confirmed that the conflict should be brought to Wikipedia's Arbitration Committee (Wikipedia, 2014b), a committee of community-elected Wikipedians who "act as a final binding decision-maker primarily for serious conduct disputes the community has been unable to resolve" (Wikipedia, 2014b). Keeping with protocol, a case was filed by Robert McClenon who named six other GGTF discussants as part of the dispute.

Between September 8 and September 24 2014, the seven parties wrote statements that explained why an arbitration case should or should not be opened (Wikipedia, 2014d). Two Kinds of Pork was concerned that GGTF participants believed "that the project should be owned by, run by, and for women only. No one believes (or should) that any project should be owned or run by one set of editors with specific traits." Likewise, SPECIFICO was concerned that the collective nature of the GGTF appeared "to have polluted community processes" because of "[f]orum shopping, canvassing, and meat puppetry." Carolmooredc focused on what she saw as sabotage since the disruption made it "impossible to discuss in a serious and collaborative fashion what we think the scope, goals and projects of the task force should be."

Eleven arbitrators deliberated on the merit of opening the case based on these statements. Newyorkbrad reflected on the question of whether the existence of the gender gap "represents participation in the task force's work or a derogation of it." Salvio argued that the GGTF was unique because it was "political in nature" and could "have an impact over Wikipedia in its entirety." This led to an argument that criticisms of the task force should be welcomed, specifically to "prevent the Task Force from becoming an echo chamber." Der Wohltemperierte Fuchs further noted that the issue was "fractious" because of the clear dividing line between "what the wider wiki community views as its goals and what the GGTF views as its goals."

According to these statements, the primary reason these arbitrators saw merit in opening the case was not due to the misconduct between individuals. Instead, it was decided that if left unchecked, the task force had the power to challenge foundational values of the community. During this same period, the GGTF's talk page reached its largest size throughout the entire lifespan of the task force, attracting 520 comments

within the span of thirty days. What was clear from both the arbitration case and the talk page was that not only was the GGTF acting (and nascently recognized) as a counterpublic, but that a defensive hypermasculine public had assembled to defend the status quo.

Arbitration cases and the defence of the GGTF (October 2014–January 2015)

Starting in November 2014, the committee deliberating on user conduct concerning the #GamerGate controversy (Wikipedia, 2014e), a case where six of the twenty-seven involved parties of the #GamerGate arbitration were also non-member discussants of GGTF talkpage. During this time, ArbCom opened GGTF's case, and twenty users submitted 443 pieces of evidence (Wikipedia, 2014d). Most of these took the form of a description of the conduct of a user and then a link to the page where the conduct took place. During the Workshop and Proposed decision stages, the case respectively accumulated 276 and 543 comments. This substantial activity by the GGTF corresponded with the sharp decline in activity on the task force's own pages. Instead of drafting proposals for how to address the gender gap, the task force was forced to defend its legitimacy.

The arbitration committee's vote to open the case represented a decision that reverberated throughout the GGTF as a strategic shift from discussing how to address the gender gap to gathering evidence for the defence of the task force to exist. At the same time, GGTF members created an extensive list of academic/news articles that confirmed the existence of the gender gap as well as a page that wikified *The Guardian's* article "The Guardian view on a year in feminism." But both efforts were called into question by detractors. Once again, detractors used policies about "soapboxes," original research, and reliable sources to limit these actions. However, these moves suggested that there was a shift in defensive tactics: from denying the social cohesion of the group to denying the validity of the content the task force produced.

After the evidence was submitted, discussed, and the proposed decisions voted on, the committee announced their decision. On December 1, Carolmooredc was found to have made personal attacks, unsubstantiated claims, and unnecessary comments about editors. She was also found to have voted three times to keep articles from being deleted since they were about women—a reason that was not accepted for keeping an article. For this conduct she was banned from topics about the gender gap and indefinitely banned from Wikipedia. Another GGTF member, Neotarf, faced the same punishment for casting aspirations, being passive-aggressive, making unfounded accusations and demonstrating a "battleground" mentality. The other users were served with the less severe sanctions: they were topic banned, prohibited from using abusive language, administered a warning, and an interaction ban. These punishments were based on incivility, personal attacks, "creating a biography on Carolmooredc whilst in dispute," displaying a battleground mentality, "passing negative comment" within the arbitration itself, being disruptive, and baiting users (Wikipedia, 2014d).

The results of the arbitration cascaded through the task force as members lamented the committee's inability to recognize how the effects of harassment on Carolmooredc had led to her very public lashing out. In fact, she had long been aware of the effects

of sealioning. Several months earlier she noted "that the seemingly polite people can be disruptive and infuriating and even lead to others getting in trouble for losing their tempers with them and getting in trouble for incivility" (Wikipedia, 2015a). By January's end, the task force members had been involved in two notable arbitrations.

The judgements were brought to the attention of American news by the *Washington Post* who reported that "opponents of the [#GamerGate] ArbCom decision accused the group of failing to support women more aggressively" (Dewey, 2015). Writing for *Slate,* David Auerbach argued that "[w]ith the Arbitration Committee opting only to ban the one woman in the [GGTF] dispute despite her behavior being no worse than that of the men." He argued that "it's hard not to see this as a setback to Wikipedia's efforts to rectify its massive gender gap" (Auerbach, 2014). In February, Wikipedia's internal newsletter covered the same ground, pointing to the fact that the gender composition of the committee had been eleven men and one woman as a contributing factor (Go Phightins!, 2015).

The reformation after the banning of Carolmooredc (February 2015–July 2015)

In the wake of the two arbitration cases, SlimVirgin worked on increasing the task force's feminist visibility. On February 4, she revised the top of the talk page to announce that it was explicitly a place for "new women editors [to] feel comfortable posting." This was joined by an image of the popular feminist icon Rosie the Riveter that that replaced "We Can Do It!" with "We Can edit!" (Figure 3). Days later, she added an image taken from Wikimedia's *Grantmaking Quarterly Review* which included the words "Fewer female contributors = less content, lower quality, systemic bias." Near the end of February, she also started writing the essay "Writing about women" which eventually contained many of the concerns about how to deal with gendered content, language, and images that had been raised in GGTF talk page topics. These edits signalled that if argument-by-talk was not going to help gain legitimacy for the task force, then it would have to be done through arguments-by-technology.

A month earlier, a GGTF discussant named Lightbreather created an experimental space that exploited an unforeseen but non-violating loophole around userpages. It permitted a user to remove any comments on their own talk page, a practice that is not accepted on other kinds of talk pages. She called it the "Kaffeeklatsch" and intended to test "a women-only space" where she moderated the space and limited access by asking members to sign a pledge of being a "woman (cisgender or trans-woman, of any sexual orientation)" (Wikipedia, 2015d). At the same time, she started a proposal for Wikimedia's IdeaLab Grants to create a space to "support women across Wikimedia projects and not just women Wikipedians," one that was modelled after the Systers mailing-list created by Anita Borg (Wikimedia, 2015).

In February, the Kaffelatsch was proposed to be deleted. Lightbreather defended her innovation "as an experiment" of how to develop an on-wiki space for women that also stayed within Wikipedia's social policies. The topic was posted to the GGTF talk page and users weighed in. When the votes for deletion were cast, they argued that Lightbreather's women-only space violated the policies of WP:CANVAS,

Figure 3. This public domain image was used on the GGTF's project page in 2015 and created by Wikipedian Tom Morris. It combines the idea of Wikipedian women being editors and the feminist icon "Rosie the Riveter" as depicted in a poster used by the US War Production Co-ordinating Committee.

WP:NOTASOCIALNETWORK, as well as being contrary to the Wikipedian approach to access.

Due to her conduct on an article on gun control, Lightbreather became the focus an ArbCom case where twelve discussants were also editors from the GGTF. In the proceedings, Two Kinds of Pork was found to be engage in off-wiki harassment unrelated to the case and was blocked from Wikipedia while Lightbreather was also banned (Wikipedia, 2019b). In defence of Lightbreather, SlimVirgin argued that the decision gave the impression that "women who are being baited are expected to keep quiet or stop editing. LB's main flaw was that she refused at each and every point to shut up about it." On August 23, SlimVirgin edited the archive box on the talk page so that it contained links to the three arbitration cases that had involved GGTF participants ("Wikipedia talk: Gender Gap Task Force," 2015). Through this act, the archive box was transformed into a memorial to the martyrdom of the task force's banned members.

While nine arbitrators had opted to ban Lightbreather, three others opposed the decision, including GorillaWarfare, the only woman on the committee. She argued that "some consideration must also be given to the abuse that Lightbreather suffered

during this case" and that it was inappropriate "to siteban someone who refused to stay quiet about the harassment" (Wikipedia, 2016). In an article with the *The Atlantic,* GorillaWarfare reflected on how "biases appear in the committee's decision-making" because "ArbCom members are mostly male." By the time the article had gone to print, the committee had elected a second woman (Paling, 2015).

The extension of the counterpublic as a response to lightbreather's case (July 2015–February 2016)

In the course of the GGTF, Lightbreather and SlimVirgin developed arguments-as-technology in the form of project and userpages. In turn, these acts served as models for other agitational actions. In view of the role that harassment played in Lightbreather's case, the "Remedies" also included inviting the community to "create and maintain a page containing practical advice and guidance on dealing with serious harassment" and to assist the WMF in improving safety polices (Wikipedia, 2019b). Within the week surrounding the end of Lightbreather's case, GGTF members and others drafted a sexual harassment policy and SlimVirgin announced that the WMF had created "a new user group for women and allies, the WikiWomen's User Group" (Wikipedia, 2015e). This space reflected some of Lightbreather's ideas since it was open to women on all of Wikimedia projects and designed to be a space to "collaborate on projects, discuss issues, and socialize with each other" (Wikimedia, 2019).

Additionally, Lightbreather's case was the catalyst for other WikiProjects. While the WikiProject:Women began in 2013, this project was edited 320 times during the span of Lightbreather's case and largely by three users: Encyclopædius, Ipigott, and Rosiestep. Of the three, Rosiestep had been commenting on the GGTF for the past year—and less than a decade later she would become one of the members of WMF's Board of Trustees (Wikimedia, 2021). In October 2015, the WikiProject described itself as "a group of editors who aim to improve Wikipedia's coverage of women's topics" and "brings Wikipedia users of all genders, sexual orientations, geographic locations, and personal backgrounds together" (Wikipedia, 2015 g). In turn, it became an umbrella project for other WikiProjects related to editing topics about women. This included the WikiProject:Women in Red and WikiProject:Women in Green which attracted GGTF members, with the first being created in July 2015 by Victuallers, also a task force member (Wikipedia, 2015h). With this expansion of the GGTF network, these efforts contributed to numerous "edit-a-thons" which are events where new and experienced users edit in-person with the goal to increase the number of articles in a topic area. In other words, the GGTF engaged with the definitional character of a counterpublic: it had become the "training grounds for agitational activities" (Mansbridge, 2017, p. 106).

The focus on creating these projects related to articles on women should also be seen as a response to the defensive hypermasculine public. Before Two Kinds of Pork was banned, he stated that the GGTF should "focus on writing more [biographies] about women" which "is about all that can be done" (Wikipedia, 2015b). This position was again reinforced when one user was reprimanded to "move on, be quiet, and write biographies of women" after suggesting that editors should stop using "sexualized language" (Wikipedia, 2015i). Likewise, this perspective reemerged after

Lightbreather's case, with one user noting that the focus on "improving behavioral guidelines, and changing the tone of discussion […] tend to rub a lot of people the wrong way." The solution they provided was to create a list of women biographies to be improved as, "[s]urely nobody could object to this?" (Wikipedia, 2015e). In response to these comments, one user rebutted by saying that "if anything can be done about the problem it will have to be done through policy reforms aimed at affecting the culture of Wikipedia." Yet, the costs of reforming Wikipedia's culture were high—as the ArbCom cases demonstrated—while editing articles was a safer form of activism.

Membership signals and the long adjournment of the task force (March 2016–July 2023)

After February 2016, the task force activity slowed down (see Figure 1). In the meantime, the number of signed participants climbed, signalling a shift from using the page to coordinate activities (which was now happening on other WikiProjects) to announcing support. Three years later, the WMF created its 2030 strategic direction to identify and address knowledge gaps within the representations and interactions surrounding content, readers, and contributors (Redi et al., 2021, pp. 4–5). When it came to the description of the gaps, many reflected what the GGTF had long suspected: they were gaps caused by censorship, the inaccessibility to internet connections and appropriate hardware due to geography or wealth inequality, the complexity of the interface and language, and harassment within the community (p. 20). So, after starting in 2013 and attracting over 180 members, the GGTF was eventually tagged as an "inactive" WikiProject in 2023, the same year that Wikimedia ratified its newly developed Universal Code of Conduct (Wikimedia, 2024). This document represented an institutional response that addressed many of the behavioural issues that the GGTF had identified and endured.

Conclusion: feminist content, not feminist conduct

During the 2014 flashpoint of #GamerGate and the subsequent five years, numerous online communities of women were targeted by trolling, vile statements, and dangerous behaviour that raised the cost of participating on the web. For Wikipedian women, this long event required action and they repurposed the sociotechnical materials of the encyclopedia: by closing disruptive discussions, creating encyclopedic articles about the gap, increasing the number of women articles, and creatively using policy loopholes to meet their own goals. Some like SlimVirgin and Carolmooredc adhered to a more wiki-based form of contesting the masculine identity of the Wikipedia. Others, like Lightbreather, advocated for a closed and enclave-based model inspired by the lineage of feminist mailing-lists. Despite these differences in degree and technique, the overall goal for both was to create spaces for women to develop a collective identity and common practices of action. These included the WikiProject Women, a WMF-supported off-wiki space for women, a rule on writing about women, reforms for the harassment policy, and a social network of women and allies dedicated to improving the encyclopedia. In the process of engaging in these activities, they constantly discussed and rearticulated the meaning of becoming Wikipedian women.

But these successes were also sculpted by their contact with editors who defended the status quo and their geek hypermasculinity. Like the counterpublic, this defensive public was shaped by Wikipedia's sociotechnical design: its values of openness, civility, and consensus were weaponized to deny the reality of the gender gap and disrupted women's ability to discuss their collective identity. Likewise, the bureaucratic nature of the site was exploited to limit feminist reforms as well as to antagonize and harass key activists to point of breaking Wikipedian conventions of civility. In doing so, they attempted to reestablish previous conditions that permitted and encouraged their masculine neutrality, heroic mastery of encyclopedic knowledge, and their claims of victimhood to be defining features of Wikipedian identity.

The Wikipedia that exists after the Gender Gap Task Force is grounded in the unsettled encounter between feminist and misogynist epistemologies. Due to the explicit purpose of Wikipedia to create and maintain encyclopaedic articles, hypermasculine geeks conceded to the creation of biographies about women—although they continued to create obstacles by controlling which of these articles would be kept or deleted and gatekeeping who is considered notable (McDowell & Vetter, 2022, p. 47; Tripodi, 2023). As a result, these activists needed to become adept at navigating the decorum of masculine neutrality to safeguard these articles from being deleted. This kind of praxis can be identified as an "assimilationist intervention" which describes working "directly with or within an interface's community to alter the interface's ideological landscape" and often results in WikiProjects dedicated to providing "more representation of marginalized topics or identities" (Vetter & Pettiway, 2017).

In contrast, the task force had the explicit goal of creating interventions that were explicitly not assimilationist—SlimVirgin's vision for the GGTF sought to change Wikipedia's anti-women culture by reforming its policies. But most GGTF activity was eventually dedicated to editorial action. But perhaps due to the nature of Wikipedia's governance, such actions need collective support to be carried forward; they will struggle to succeed edit by edit, user by user. It required the composition of a "we" that could unite women in their desire for change. The Universal Code of Conduct is an example of the kind of WMF-supported reform that appeals to such demands. But such gains have come at a deep social cost. The encyclopedists of the early twentieth century were forged from the incommensurable encounters between feminist and misogynist epistemologies. They were at the leading edge of a gap in knowledge; its outline constantly shifted, meandering across an uncertain terrain of who was recognized as belonging to an emerging and consequential class of user within digital culture. They sought to answer a simple question: Who was a Wikipedian? Who could they be?

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