Chapter 16
Breastfeeding, Authority, and Genre: Women’s Ethos in Wikipedia and Blogs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is concerned with women’s mis- or underrepresentation in knowledge creation, particularly when it comes to their bodies. In this chapter, the authors examine how Wikipedia’s generic regulations determine that women’s often experiential ethos is unwelcome on the site. Thus, women are often unable to construct knowledge on the “Breastfeeding” entry; their epistemological methods are ignored or banned by other contributors. This chapter also examines six breastfeeding-focused mommyblogs, proposing blogs as an alternative genre that welcomes women’s ethos. However, the authors also recognize that such blogs are not a perfect epistemological paradigm. The chapter closes with an examination of the implications of this work for academic collaboration across fields and for women’s agency.

INTRODUCTION

Women often struggle to find a place online to express themselves and to create credible knowledge. Whether women write about issues as mundane as wedding dresses or as important as health issues, they are often harassed and silenced by a variety of strategies as overt as trolling and as opaque as editing. Previous research about breastfeeding rhetoric (Koerber, 2013; Koerber et al, 2012; Koerber, 2006) demonstrated that breastfeeding is situated in disciplinary and discursive contexts that control women’s bodies, such as science, medicine, and education. One way discursive power manifests online is through controlling sources of knowledge. This chapter offers case studies of the Wikipedia “Breastfeeding” entry and six blogs written by nursing mothers, mommyblogs, to show how feminist standpoint theory (Haraway, 1988) and apparent feminism (Frost, 2015) reveal that some spaces use a guise of balance.
impartiality, and free speech to hinder women’s processes of knowledge creation, while other spaces welcome experiential ethos. This study of knowledge production and ethos, which is grounded in the authority and credibility to create and evaluate that knowledge, reveals a reciprocal relationship between the knower and the known. The authors find that women prefer alternative etheas and are excluded because of cultural norms and hierarchies rather than truth or reality. Based on feminist standpoint theory and apparent feminism, this article rhetorically analyzes Wikipedia’s “Breastfeeding” entry and its Talk page and six mommyblogs.

Collaborative writing has the potential to provide multiple viewpoints, but Wikipedia contributors—nearly 90% of whom are male (Simonite, 2013)—dismiss the credibility of women, even on issues of women’s health. This work suggests that the design of Wikipedia’s site and the culture it supports enforce a “neutral point of view” (NPOV) that excludes women’s experiences because they are underrepresented in normative discourses of medicine, science, and philosophy. Wikipedia’s generic conventions necessitate that contributors engage in debates about epistemology, truth, verifiability, and validity (McIntyre, 2010; Kennedy, 2009; Garfinkel, 2008). These conventions lead editors to question, challenge, or dismiss women’s ethos when discussing an epistemology of their own bodies, thus silencing many female contributors. As a result of this persistent exclusion, women often avoid collaboratively curated sites like Wikipedia altogether (Hargittai & Shaw, 2015; Eckert & Steiner, 2013; Reagle & Rhue, 2011; Reagle, 2009). The consequences of these rhetorical moves have implications beyond digital spaces and contribute to society’s persistent negative view of breastfeeding as something that must always happen in the margins.

In contrast, blogs provide a refreshing look at breastfeeding and women’s digital ethos, giving women a forum in which to speak. However, the personal and individual nature of blogs prevents women from contributing to official narratives about their own bodies on a more public level: while their knowledge is marginalized, they continue to be ostracized for and banned from public breastfeeding despite the efforts blogs make to reverse such restrictions. The authors selected six mommyblogs—The Breastfeeding Mother (TBM), Chronicles of a Nursing Mom (CoaNM), Paa.la, Unlatched, Dispelling Breastfeeding Myths (DPM), and Breast for the Weary (BftW)—because they appeared in a list of top breastfeeding blogs and/or were top results in a Summer 2015 Google search for the keywords “breastfeeding” and “blog.” The bloggers at TBM, Unlatched, and BftW no longer update their pages, but the information they provide therein remains relevant and sought after; CoaNM, Paa.la, and DPM continue to post updates.

A brief note on data presentation is in order here because the authors will reference multiple posts from each blog, the date of the post will appear next to its quote or summary, but no direct links will appear in the text or references.

This chapter will examine Wikipedia and mommyblogs post-publication to determine how each site uses generic design and cultural expectations to signal to their users what kinds of ethos is welcomed. Rhetorical analysis will reveal that the epistemologies behind these culturally saturated sites mirror how our society values different forms of knowledge. Rhetorical analysis is a suitable method for this study because of the nature of this inquiry. As Koerber (2013) suggested, “[R]hetorical analysis can enrich our understanding of the manner in which expert knowledge is produced and the channels through which individuals in the public sphere receive and relate to such information” (p. 7). Likewise, Selzer (2004) explained rhetorical analysis as “studying carefully some kind of symbolic action, often after the fact of its delivery and irrespective of whether it was actually directed to you or not, so that you might understand it better and appreciate its tactics” (p. 281). This chapter also answers Novotny’s (2015) call to “build and take up feminist methodologies that intervene in the designs of policies and projects.