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OLDENBOURG

*Petros Apostolopoulos*  
**PRODUCING AND  
DEBATING HISTORY**

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CONTEMPORARY AND DIGITAL HISTORY

**STUDIES IN DIGITAL HISTORY  
AND HERMENEUTICS**

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Petros Apostolopoulos

**Producing and Debating History**

# **Studies in Digital History and Hermeneutics**



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and Gerben Zaagsma

## **Volume 10**

Petros Apostolopoulos

# Producing and Debating History



Historical Knowledge on Wikipedia

**DE GRUYTER**  
OLDENBOURG

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To Katerina, for all her love and support.



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April 2024

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# Introduction

In the mid-1990s, the rise of the Internet and the proliferation of personal computers challenged many habits of historical scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Professional historians and history enthusiasts, genealogists, and other groups started to publish websites and blogs about history.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars in academia became skeptical about the reliability of these websites, where amateur and non-professional historians were able to produce, store, and disseminate historical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> History and knowledge about the past became accessible and usable to anyone with Internet access. As the literature scholar Ann Rigney points out, the digital production of historical knowledge became appropriated by several agents “including those who produce sites and those who visit them and leave their traces in the form of additional photographs, comments or stories”.<sup>4</sup> Professional historians remained active participants in that process, but they do not constitute the only “gatekeepers” of this public distribution and production of historical knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

The Internet did not only change the way that people engage with history but also the structures and hierarchies of historical knowledge.<sup>6</sup> As Jerome de Groot argues, several important high-tech companies started to control these new opportunities and tried to give “programming and content power” to users through technology.<sup>7</sup> Some striking examples are Google, Wikipedia, Facebook, and YouTube.<sup>8</sup> These popular digital spaces changed the ways that historical knowledge is gathered, produced, and disseminated.<sup>9</sup> They encourage a creative engagement

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1 Regarding the rise of the Internet and the expansion of the personal computer, see Janet Abbate, *Inventing the Internet. Inside Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). For how the Internet and personal computers have changed historical scholarship, see Ian Milligan, *The Transformation of Historical Research in the Digital Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

2 Mark Poster, “History in the Digital Domain,” *Historein* 4 (2003): 20.

3 Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, “Web of lies? Historical knowledge on the Internet,” *First Monday: Peer-Reviewed Journal on the Internet* 10 (2005), accessed February 15, 2019, <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1299/1219>

4 Ann Rigney, “When the monograph is no longer the medium: Historical narrative in the online age,” *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 114–15.

5 *Ibid.*, 115.

6 Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History. Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 90.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Arnold, 2000), 189; Mark Poster, “Manifesto for a history of the media,” in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alan Munslow (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 40.

with the past, as users are not just passive consumers of histories produced by others but take active roles in the construction of historical narratives.<sup>10</sup> Web-users produce historical knowledge by engaging, discussing, using, interpreting, and negotiating the past.

This book examines how historical knowledge is produced in one of the most central digital communities of knowledge, Wikipedia. In 2001, the American Internet entrepreneur Jimmy Wales founded the online encyclopedia with its main concept being that “anyone can edit any page”.<sup>11</sup> This allowed Wikipedia to also function as a common and public space for personal reflection. Wikipedia provides this opportunity through the “talk” pages, as each Wikipedia entry has its own “talk” area (Figure 1). More specifically, each entry has two tabs, one with the up-to-date version of the article, and the other named “talk” where users can find the archived discussions about all the edits that the given entry has endured through time. Thus, the “talk” area shows all the discussions and debates between Wikipedia users about the entries. The users question statements that are cited on the Wikipedia page, expressing their disagreements and their suggestions for the relevant entry. Other users then correspond, and the “talk” page becomes a discussion page. On top of that, there is also the “view history” page for each entry, which just logs all the changes (without the discussion), and copies of older versions of the articles (Figure 1).

To demonstrate how historical knowledge is produced on Wikipedia, this book answers the following sub-questions: What are the methods and guidelines that Wikipedia establishes to produce knowledge about the past? How does Wikipedia encourage its users to get involved in the production of historical knowledge, expressing their views online about the past and the way in which they remember it? What historical connections do they make between the past and the present and how is this expressed in the main entry? How do Wikipedia editors engage with historical events and transform the past into historical knowledge? Why do Wikipedians decide to contribute to the production of historical knowledge? Which factors determine their editing choices? What are the characteristics of Wikipedia editors, who actively create and edit articles related to history?

The main argument of this book is that Wikipedia allows people to discuss and debate the past, expressing their opinions and emotions about history and its significance in the present and the future through the “talk” area that Wikipedia

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<sup>10</sup> Regarding the participation of people in popular historical activities, see Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past. Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution* (London: Hyperion ebook, 2009), 14.

## September 11 attacks

Article **Talk** 139 languages  
 Read View source **View history** Tools

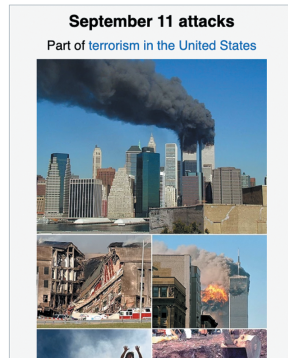
From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia Coordinates: 40.711437°N 74.015498°W﻿ / ﻿40.711437; -74.015498

*For other events on the same date, see [September 11 attacks \(disambiguation\)](#).*

*"9/11" redirects here. For the calendar dates, see [September 11](#) and [November 9](#). For the reverse, see [11/9 \(disambiguation\)](#).*

*"9-11" redirects here. For the collection of interviews with Noam Chomsky, see [9-11 \(book\)](#).*

The **September 11 attacks**, commonly known as **9/11**,<sup>[f]</sup> were four coordinated **Islamist suicide terrorist attacks** carried out by **al-Qaeda** against the **United States of America** in 2001. That morning, **19 terrorists** hijacked four commercial **airliners** scheduled to travel from the **East Coast** to **California**. The hijackers crashed the first two planes into the **Twin Towers** of the **World Trade Center** in **New York City**, two of the **world's five tallest buildings** at the time, and aimed the next two flights toward targets in or near **Washington, D.C.**, in an attack on the nation's **capital**. The third team succeeded in striking the **Pentagon**, the headquarters of the **U.S. Department of Defense** in **Arlington County, Virginia**, while the **fourth plane** crashed in rural **Pennsylvania** during a passenger revolt. The September 11 attacks killed 2,977 people, making them the **deadliest terrorist attack** in history. In response to the attacks, the United States waged the multi-decade global **War on Terror** to eliminate hostile groups deemed terrorist organizations, as well as the foreign governments purported to support them. Conflicts were fought in **Afghanistan**, **Iraq**, **Syria**, and several other countries, under this justification.



**Figure 1:** Screenshot of “September 11 attacks,” accessed July 2, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September\\_11\\_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks).

provides.<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia offers a public and digital space for personal engagement and reflection on the production of historical knowledge. Wikipedia users develop multiple relations with the past, take part in discussions and debates about history and its representation, and in that way produce history. This does not mean that all Wikipedia users have the same role and power in the production of historical knowledge. Historical knowledge is not just a product of collaboration and public discussion but the result of hierarchy and power. Wikipedia allows all its users to discuss the editing process of a Wikipedia article and express their own historical understandings in the “talk page” of the article, but few of them, the most experienced editors, can make their contributions part of the main article.

## Between public and digital history

This study draws from the historiography of public and digital history, as it was developed in the United States and Europe, and, more specifically, from works

<sup>12</sup> “Wikipedia: Core Content Policies,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 3, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Core\\_content\\_policies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Core_content_policies)

that fall into two categories. Studies that investigate public memory and studies that focus on the co-production of historical knowledge and “shared authority”.<sup>13</sup> These two categories cover several concepts and approaches, which create an important ground for the examination of Wikipedia, but they also reveal weaknesses and historiographical gaps that this book aims to fill.

History and memory have a long relationship; however, the term public memory was a result of public history’s engagement with memory.<sup>14</sup> Several decades before the institutionalization of public history in the late 1970s, the historian Carl Becker introduced the connection between history, memory, and the public.<sup>15</sup> Becker opened up history by enabling the public to engage with the past and, more precisely, to be part of the past through their memories.<sup>16</sup> However, Becker’s arguments remained marginal for the next decades. In 1981 the oral historian Michael Frisch started to engage further with the relationship between public memory and history.<sup>17</sup> Frisch argued that most works of public history make clear the need for a wider sharing of knowledge and broader participation in history-making.<sup>18</sup> Frisch followed Becker’s suggestions concerning the importance of memory in the production of historical knowledge and pointed out that public history cannot be public without the study of memory. For that reason, even if a memory is historical or ahistorical, public historians should engage in the process of remembering.<sup>19</sup> The study of historical memory can reveal information about “how the past does or doesn’t figure in our lives, and what this, in turn, tells us about both history and ourselves”.<sup>20</sup>

In the historiography of public history, memory took the form of an active agent that shapes public understanding and perception of the past. This became the dominant approach of public historians to public memory. In the late 1980s, the French historian Pierre Nora showed that memory is affective and signifies a

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<sup>13</sup> I focus on public memory as it has been developed in the historiography of public history and not on the general term of memory and its role in historical scholarship.

<sup>14</sup> The first work that engaged with memory on a collective level was the study of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs published in 1925. See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” *American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 221–36. Halbwachs argued that collective memory is socially constructed. For the different types of memory (collective memory, popular memory, public memory, counter-memory), see David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (April 1996): 7–23.

<sup>16</sup> Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” 223.

<sup>17</sup> Michael H. Frisch, “The Memory of History,” *Radical History Review* 25 (1981): 9–23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

connection with the present, while history is a representation of the past.<sup>21</sup> Based on this theoretical framework, in the next decades, several studies started to appear and investigate how memory shapes our historical understanding through its connection to the present, its affective character, and its connection to institutions that influence people's perception of the past.

For the historian Michael Kammen, memory became an important agent that shaped two major processes that defined tradition in American culture since 1870, the Americanization of tradition and then its democratization.<sup>22</sup> The urban historian, Hayden Dolores argued that both personal and collective memories are tied to public spaces.<sup>23</sup> For Hayden, landscapes are “storehouses,” in which different social groups of people place their memories.<sup>24</sup> Edward Linenthal and John Bodnar showed that memory can be productive, generating “history wars” that led to the cancelation of exhibitions and public debates.<sup>25</sup> Mike Wallace examined memory close to power and the present and showed how the relation of Americans with their past changed from the 1940s to the 1970s.<sup>26</sup> John Bodnar focused on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and showed two different dimensions of public memory, one related to “official” culture and another related to “vernacular” culture.<sup>27</sup> Both sides represent different political beliefs about the past and its commemoration in the present. In another study, Bodnar also explored how the present and the future shaped the memories of two generations, the 1930s and the 1960s, in Whiting, Indiana, a town close to Chicago, in 1991.<sup>28</sup> Both generations remember their stories based not only on the past but also on the future.<sup>29</sup>

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21 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24.

22 Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 13.

23 Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 9.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 5; Edward Linenthal, “Struggling with History and Memory,” *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 1094–101; John Bodnar, *The “Good War” in American Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

26 Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), xi.

27 John Bodnar, *Remaking America. Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 13–14.

28 John Bodnar, “Generational Memory in an American Town,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 26 (Spring 1996): 619.

29 *Ibid.*, 637.



In the late 1990s, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen presented a different way to approach memory. Instead of focusing on archives, memorials, and exhibitions, they conducted interviews and investigated how the past shapes the “historical consciousness” and “historical memory” of Americans.<sup>30</sup> However, the emphasis on how the public actively engages with the past is more an exception in the studying of public memory rather than the norm. The abandonment of that approach by more recent studies has led to a lack of knowledge on how the public both remembers and makes sense of the past in the digital age – something that this book seeks to redress. In 1998, David Glassberg examined how Americans have understood and used the past in the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> He made a significant distinction between the “interpretation of history” that professional historians do and the “sense of history” that the public has. This “sense of history” is a “perspective on the past at the core of who they are and the people and the places they care about”.<sup>32</sup> However, Glassberg’s work differs from Rosenzweig and Thelen’s study, as he focused on public perception of the past through war memorials, festivals, places, and historical documentaries and not on how people themselves understand and think about the past. Following a similar approach, Alison Landsberg introduced the useful concept of “prosthetic memory” to describe the type of memory that is produced when a person becomes part of a broader and larger story through media, even if they did not live during the period in question.<sup>33</sup> Landsberg viewed public memory through movies, novels, or museum exhibitions and not in relation to how people perceived all those historical forms. This approach reveals a repeating pattern in the historiography of public memory.

Erika Doss connected public memory to emotions.<sup>34</sup> She explored why, in recent years, there has been an explosion of public monument-making, a “memory boom,” in the US and Europe, but also a broader shift from monuments to memo-

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30 Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*. The approach of Rosenzweig and Thelen to focus on the public to detect memory has also been followed by other studies, see for example Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Tammy Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976. Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

31 David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), xiii.

32 *Ibid.*, 6.

33 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

34 Erika Doss, *The Emotional Life of Contemporary Public Memorials. Towards a Theory of Temporary Memorials* (Amsterdam University Press, 2008) and *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago University Press, 2010).

rials.<sup>35</sup> Her main argument was that “today’s ‘memory boom’ reflects less, then, a declension of historical consciousness than a cultural shift toward public feeling, toward affective modes of knowledge and comprehension”.<sup>36</sup> However, she did not ask the public how they express their emotions, how they engage with the past, or how they perceive memorials. Instead, she approached the public as a receptor of cultural changes which has given rise to modern memorialization.

In the last decades, several studies appeared and focused on the relation between public memory and museums. For example, the work of Dell Upton explored several civil rights and African American history monuments in the contemporary South to show how these sites managed to integrate their past and define it in the twenty-first century.<sup>37</sup> Roger Aden used the case study of President’s House in Philadelphia to explore how a place of public memory is shaped and how different social groups, institutions, and individuals give meaning to it.<sup>38</sup> The past becomes public memory through power, arguments, conflicts, compromises, selections, and negotiations.<sup>39</sup> Amy Sodaro studied different memorial museums and explored how those museums engage with the past, trauma, and violence.<sup>40</sup> Her study showed that public memory in museums is always socially and politically constructed and strongly connected to the present.<sup>41</sup> All those studies have offered useful theoretical frameworks and concepts for the studying of public memory on Wikipedia. However, as shown above, there is a tendency to study memory as a reflection of institutions, memorials, museums, media, movies, novels, etc. that shape public perception of the past. This repeating approach has ignored to a large extent the publicity of public memory. Even though memory reveals people’s understanding of the past, it appears to be imposed on the public by museums, movies, TV shows, memorials, historical sites, exhibitions, etc. In that way, the historiography of public history has ignored how the public(s) create, shape, and share their memories about the past. In this study, I focus on the memories of Wikipedia users and explore how their memories engage with the dominant historical narratives, why they feel the need to share their memories, and how their memories contribute to the production of historical knowledge. At the same time, as I show in this book,

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35 Doss, *The Emotional Life*, 5.

36 *Ibid.*, 37.

37 Dell Upton, *What Can and Can’t Be Said* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).

38 Roger Aden, *Upon the Ruins of Liberty: Slavery, the President’s House at Independence National Historical Park, and Public Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

39 *Ibid.*

40 Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity. Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 133.

41 *Ibid.*, 182.

historical knowledge on Wikipedia is not only the result of personal and collective memories but also of compliance with the policies and guidelines of the Wikipedia community.

Regarding the second category, the “shared authority,” in 1990 Michael Frisch offered a significant methodological framework for how to do public and oral history. He pointed out that a great way of doing oral and public history is through the concept of “shared authority”.<sup>42</sup> For Frisch, public historians should not just set questions to and simply extract knowledge from the public, but they should promote collaboration between themselves and the narrators.<sup>43</sup> They should advance a democratized shared historical consciousness and encourage more participation in debates about history.<sup>44</sup>

Several works tried to engage with that concept and the co-production of historical knowledge. Most scholars saw “shared authority” as a theoretical element naturally embedded in public history’s identity and few tried to explore it deeper or – even more importantly – to apply it.<sup>45</sup> Of course, there are important studies that tried to apply “shared authority” to specific projects. For example, Katharine Corbett and Howard Miller used the concepts of “shared authority” and “shared inquiry” as ways of “doing history with the public” and not for the public.<sup>46</sup> Also, John Bodnar successfully applied “shared authority” to generational memory by conducting several interviews with individuals.<sup>47</sup> Benjamin Filene examined how many people, who work outside museums and universities, referred to as “outsider history-makers,” approach history in a way that provokes the interest of thou-

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), xx. Frisch has also analyzed “shared authority” in other works. For a more contemporary view of “shared authority” in the digital age, see Michael Frisch, “From *A Shared Authority* to the Digital Kitchen, and Back,” in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Adair Bill, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 126–37.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii; Thomas Cauvin, “The Rise of Public History: An International Perspective,” *Historia Crítica* 68 (2018): 8.

<sup>44</sup> Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, xxii.

<sup>45</sup> There are several theoretical works on “shared authority” and its significance for the development of public history. See David Dean, “Introduction,” in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), 1–11; Rebecca Conard, “Complicating Origin Stories: The Making of Public History into an Academic Field in the United States,” in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), 19–32; Cauvin, “The Rise of Public History,” 3–26.

<sup>46</sup> Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, “A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry,” *Public Historian* 28 (2006): 16.

<sup>47</sup> Bodnar, “Generational Memory in an American Town”.

sands.<sup>48</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen followed the method of “shared authority” by using surveys to explore how Americans understand their past.<sup>49</sup> For Rosenzweig and Thelen, this approach showed how historians can make historical culture more participatory and turn the individuals into “active users or interpreters of the past”.<sup>50</sup> Andrea Burns explored how the African American communities of the 1960s and 1970s worked for the creation of their own cultural institutions.<sup>51</sup> Tammy Gordon analyzed the two-hundredth anniversary of the American Revolution by showing how individuals, social groups, and communities of 1976 actively engaged with the past and tried to integrate their works into the national narrative.<sup>52</sup> All those works saw “shared authority” as a methodological tool to do public history and applied it to specific cases. However, in the last three decades, there have been more works that engage theoretically with “shared authority” than those that apply “shared authority”.<sup>53</sup> In this study, I have used “shared authority” as a methodological concept in multiple ways by focusing on the comments that Wikipedia editors make, their data in their profile pages, their stories, and their experiences from their engagement with the production of history on Wikipedia.

Since the late 1990s, as the personal computer and the Internet had become part of people’s everyday life, several historians started to explore the opportunities that digital technologies had to offer. Most scholars identified the promise of digital technologies for the co-production and democratization of historical knowledge. The term democratization does not refer only to issues of access to historical scholarship but also to issues of production – more people involved in the process of writing and defining history. In other words, more – nonacademic – people have access to digitized historical sources and they can also actively take part in the production of history online. So, digital technologies made the discussion about co-production and “shared authority” even more intensive. As Michael Frisch has explained, on the subject of “shared authority” in the digital age, digital technologies can make audio or video recordings available and reachable for the archiver, the researcher, the user, and the community.<sup>54</sup>

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48 Benjamin Filene, “Passionate Histories: ‘Outsider’ History-Makers and What They Teach Us,” *Public Historian* 34 (2012): 11.

49 Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

50 *Ibid.*, 192, 194.

51 Andrea A. Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

52 Tammy Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976. Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 4–7.

53 See n. 45.

54 Frisch, “From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back,” 128.

More and more scholars started to engage with the increasing digitization of archives and historical records through digital technologies.<sup>55</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and Michael O'Malley saw the Web as a global “hypertext,” in which users could follow different roads and have access to documents, images, sounds, and films.<sup>56</sup> Edward Ayers argued that digital technologies could make historians imagine new ways to present history by displaying data, maps, texts, images, and sounds and by enabling users to make connections and explore all those materials.<sup>57</sup> Rosenzweig and Daniel Cohen showed that digital archives can preserve different voices that exist on the Web and give a democratic perspective to the past.<sup>58</sup> As Rosenzweig explained, digital archives would not belong to intellectual and academic power, but everyone would have access to them.<sup>59</sup> In 2008, during a round table on digital history, several historians argued that the digitization of archives through digital technologies and their online availability could contribute to the democratization of historical knowledge, as more and more people would have access to it.<sup>60</sup> They saw the Web as a place where the historian and the public could collaborate, produce, and share historical knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Notably, all of these works share two key characteristics. Firstly, they suggest that most scholars viewed digitization more as a promise for the future rather than as a phenomenon that was taking place at that very time.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, and even more importantly, all of them have tended to focus more on the growing access of the public to historical knowledge in the digital era rather than on the participation of the public in the production of historical knowledge.

Rosenzweig was an influential figure in the association of digital technologies with the democratization of historical knowledge. In 1994 he created the Center

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55 For a detailed history of digital history, see Adam Crymble, *Technology and the Historian: Transformations in the Digital Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

56 Roy Rosenzweig and Michael O'Malley, “Brave New World or Blind Alley? American History on the World Wide Web,” *Journal of American History* 84, no. 1 (June 1997): 132–3.

57 Edward Ayers, “The Pasts and Futures of Digital History,” *History News* 56, no. 4 (2001): 6.

58 Roy Rosenzweig, “Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era,” *American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003): 755; Daniel J Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

59 Rosenzweig, “Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era,” 755.

60 Daniel J. Cohen, Michael Frisch, Patrick Gallagher, et al., “Interchange: The Promise of Digital History,” *The Journal of American History* 95 (2008): 455.

61 *Ibid.*, 472.

62 For a historiographical overview of digitization, its history, politics, and challenges, see Gerben Zaagsma, “Digital History and the Politics of Digitization,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2022): 1–22.

for History and New Media, a research institution at George Mason University, which aimed to study and use digital media “to democratize the past – to incorporate multiple voices, reach diverse audiences, and encourage popular participation in presenting and preserving the past”.<sup>63</sup> This center contributed to the development of several digital history projects, such as the *September 11 Digital Archive*, the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank*, the *Bracero History Archive*, *Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives and Objects of History*, which showed that digital technologies could bring the public closer to history.<sup>64</sup> Most of those projects aimed to encourage users to upload documents, photographs, videos, letters related to traumatic historical events, such as September 11 or Hurricane Katrina. They did not use technology to only provide access to historical documents to the public. Instead, they invited the public to creatively engage with the past and make their personal stories part of the broader historical narrative by placing those stories into a digital archive.

In the 2000s, several other digital public history projects started to appear in collaboration with universities, research centers, and libraries.<sup>65</sup> They aimed to enable users to both consume and produce historical knowledge. Digital public history projects continued to use “shared authority” for the purpose of integrating marginalized stories of the public.<sup>66</sup> Most of those projects were based on the

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63 Stephen Robertson, “The Differences between Digital Humanities and Digital History,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), accessed August 10, 2021, <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/ed4a1145-7044-42e9-a898-5ff8691b6628#ch25>

64 *Ibid.* For some studies on those projects, see Despoina Valatsou, “History, our own Stories and Emotions Online,” *Historein* 8 (2008): 108–16; Pedro Telles da Silveira, “From Instant History to the Infinite Archive: Digital Archiving, Memory and the Practical Past at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media,” *Historein* 17, no. 2 (2018), accessed July 3, 2020, <https://ejournals.e-publishing.ekt.gr/index.php/historein/article/view/10964/16290> For the connection between digital technologies and public history, see Cohen, et al., “Interchange: The Promise of Digital History,” 464; Mellisa Dinsman, “The Digital in the Humanities: An Interview with Sharon M. Leon,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 10, 2016, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-digital-in-the-humanities-an-interview-with-sharon-m-leon>; Fien Danniau, “Public History in a Digital Context. Back to the Future or Back to Basics?” *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 128, no. 4 (2013): 118–44.

65 For the concept of digital public history, see Dinsman, “The Digital in the Humanities: An Interview with Sharon M. Leon”; Danniau, “Public History in a Digital Context,” 118–44; Serge Noiret, Mark Tebeau, and Gerben Zaagsma, “Introduction,” in *Handbook of Digital Public History*, ed. Serge Noiret, Mark Tebeau, and Gerben Zaagsma (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 1–15.

66 For example, see Vicki Mayer and Mike Griffith, “MediaNOLA: A Digital Humanities Project to Tell Stories of Cultural Production in New Orleans,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 2, no. 2 (2013), accessed March 10, 2019, <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/2-2/medianola-by-vicki-mayer-and-mike-griffith/>; Shawn Graham, Guy Massie, and Nadine Feuerherm, “The HeritageCrowd Project:

method of crowdsourcing and wiki technologies to attract individuals to visit and contribute to the projects. On the other hand, several other projects used “shared authority” as a tool for giving the public more access to historical sources and interpretations of the past.<sup>67</sup> However, some crucial questions remained unanswered. Did all those digital public history projects manage to attract a non-academic public? How did the public engage with the past and understand history? Only a few scholars tried to analyze how all these projects worked, if they were successful and managed to engage a broader non-academic audience, how people took part in the projects, and more significantly how they interpreted history.<sup>68</sup> For this reason, all those projects still contain, in Cameron Blevins’ words, a “perpetual future tense,” even if they have appeared in the last three decades.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, there is a significant lack of studies that explore how the public has participated in the production of historical knowledge by using digital tools and technologies.

In the last decades, most works in digital history have been strongly connected to the broader field of digital humanities and have focused more on the application of computational tools for the study of history.<sup>70</sup> However, the con-

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A Case Study in Crowdsourcing Public History,” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, ed. Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (Michigan University Press, 2013), accessed August 10, 2021, <https://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/public-history/graham-et-al-2012-spring/>; Lauren Jae Gutterman, “OutHistory.org: An Experiment in LGBTQ Community History-Making,” *The Public Historian* 32, no. 4 (2010): 96–109; Andrew Hurley, “Chasing the Frontiers of Digital Technology: Public History Meets the Digital Divide,” *The Public Historian* 38, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 69–88.

<sup>67</sup> For example, see Drew Vandecreek, “Webs of Significance: The Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project, New Technology, and the Democratization of History,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (2007), accessed May 8, 2020, <http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/1/1/000003/000003.html>; M. Tebeau, “Listening to the City: Oral History and Place in the Digital Era,” *Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (December 1, 2013): 25–35.

<sup>68</sup> Only a few scholars have evaluated or critically examined those projects. For example, Fien Danniau has mentioned the failure of many digital public history projects to attract the public: see Danniau, “Public History in a Digital Context”. Also, Pedro Telles da Silveira has criticized the Roy Rozenzweig Center’s project for its inability to contextualize history: see da Silveira, “From Instant History to the Infinite Archive: Digital Archiving, Memory and the Practical Past at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media”.

<sup>69</sup> Cameron Blevins, “Digital History’s Perpetual Future Tense,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), accessed August 10, 2021, <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/4555da10-0561-42c1-9e34-112f0695f523#ch26>

<sup>70</sup> On what Digital Humanities is and the different approaches of scholars to it, see Mellisa Dinsman, “The Digital in the Humanities: A Special Interview Series,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 27, 2016, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/feature/the-digital-in-the-humanities>; Ray Siemens Schreiber and John Unsworth, *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*

nection between digital technologies and the democratization of historical scholarship still remains important. In a series of interviews with digital humanities scholars organized by the English Literature professor Mellisa Dinsman, several historians, members of the media, and literature scholars discussed the possibility of digital humanities creating a link between academia and the public.<sup>71</sup> The historians Jessica Marie Johnson and Sharon Leon, and the English scholars Marisa Parham and Bethany Nowvskie, argued that digital technologies can bridge the gap between scholarship and the public, which remains significant and has tended to characterize the discussion about digital history in the last decades.<sup>72</sup>

The major weakness of these works in digital and public historiography is that they have been limited to simple celebrations of the potential achievements of “shared authority” without investigating all these projects more closely and examining whether they have managed to engage the public. Most works have focused on the access and not on the production of historical knowledge.<sup>73</sup> Also, only few works have applied “shared authority” as a method of doing public history and even fewer have studied the co-production of knowledge critically. In the last years, many studies have criticized “shared authority,” co-production, and openness as neoliberal features that hide labor exploitation, structures of power, hierarchies, and social, economic, and racial inequalities in the digital world.<sup>74</sup> Several works have also analyzed how digital platforms, such as Facebook, Amazon, YouTube, etc. make a profit based on users, who produce content

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(Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015); Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg, “Introduction,” in *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015), 1–8.

71 Dinsman, “The Digital in the Humanities: A Special Interview Series”.

72 Of course, other digital humanities scholars, such as Franco Moretti, David Golumbia, and Alexander Galloway, disagreed with the statement that digital humanities can create bridges between academia and the public.

73 For a more detailed analysis of how the historiography of public history has focused more on the consumption of history by the public and not on the production of history by the public, see Petros Apostolopoulos, “What is the Public of Public History? Between the Public Sphere and Public Agency,” *Magazén – International Journal for Digital and Public Humanities* 2, no. 2 (2021): 311–27.

74 For example, see Fred Turner, “Machine Politics: The Rise of the Internet and a New Age of Authoritarianism,” *Harper’s Magazine* (January 2019): 25–33; Daniel Kreiss, Megan Finn, and Fred Turner, “The Limits of Peer Production: Some Reminders from Max Weber for the Network Society,” *New Media and Society* 13, no. 2 (March 2011): 243–59; Nathaniel Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017).



and data without being properly compensated.<sup>75</sup> Most of these have been written by media and communication scholars, not historians.

My study on Wikipedia takes into account all those aspects and explores how historical knowledge is produced on Wikipedia by revealing the power relations that are embedded in the online encyclopedia, the hierarchy and the structure of Wikipedia, the characteristics of Wikipedia editors, who create and edit historical articles, and the reasons why Wikipedia editors decide to contribute to the production of historical knowledge. In 1990, Michael Frisch criticized public history scholarship for being “supply side,” namely, for focusing on historians and curators as suppliers of historical memory.<sup>76</sup> This approach created two different sides in public history, the historians as suppliers and the public as consumers.<sup>77</sup> This book breaks down the dichotomy between producers and consumers. It places the public itself at the forefront of historical inquiry by exploring how Wikipedia users actively engage with history, how they remember, discuss, and negotiate the past, while they try to contribute to the creation and editing of historical articles on Wikipedia.

## A historiographical overview of Wikipedia

The foundation of Wikipedia and the new methods of collection, production, and dissemination of knowledge that it introduced, piqued the interest of many academics, who were curious to study this new encyclopedia. Many works were published to analyze Wikipedia and most of them fall into the following categories: (1) the accuracy of Wikipedia and its relation to education; (2) the history of Wikipedia; (3) the structures of Wikipedia including its participation practices, open character, hierarchy, underrepresentation of specific social groups, and bias in its contents; and (4) the datafication of Wikipedia.

Regarding the first category, an important work and one of the first studies on Wikipedia is the article by the historian Roy Rosenzweig, in which he examined the accuracy of Wikipedia in US history and the way that Wikipedia presents

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75 On digital platforms and labor, see Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*; Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in *Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emory (Minneapolis University Press, 1996), 132–47; Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 73–97; Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus, “Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0: My Space and Social Networks,” *ephemera: theory and politics in organization* 7, no. 1 (2007): 88–106.

76 Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, 187.

77 On this dichotomy, also see Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976*, 4.

historical events.<sup>78</sup> According to this study, Wikipedia accurately reports names, dates, and events in US history and most of the factual errors are small and insignificant. Also, these errors did not differ much from either the Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia or the Encyclopedia Britannica. Rosenzweig's critique of Wikipedia was that good historical scholarship does not only require an accurate presentation of historical events but also good knowledge of literature, analysis and interpretation of sources, and a "clear and engaging prose".<sup>79</sup> In their study, the historian Cullen Chandler and the librarian Alison Gregory ignored the traditional warnings of academics about the problems of using Wikipedia within educational contexts and used Wikipedia as an example of a resource that can help students develop their critical thinking.<sup>80</sup> Several other studies have placed more emphasis on the broader technology that Wikipedia uses and explored how this technology can become an important tool for education.<sup>81</sup>

A volume edited by two scholars of education, Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki, offered different interesting perspectives about history on Wikipedia.<sup>82</sup> Specifically, the chapter by the historian Martha Saxton studied the representation of women across the online encyclopedia and showed how students should deal with this source of knowledge.<sup>83</sup> Saxton shared her experience of working with students analyzing Wikipedia entries related to women's history, evaluating their contents and sources for accuracy and significance.<sup>84</sup> The historian Amanda Seligman explored how Wikipedia can teach students to think about authority, authorship, and argument in tertiary sources.<sup>85</sup> Seligman pointed out that instead of forbidding Wikipedia as a source of knowledge, historians can use Wikipedia as a valuable pedagogical tool. She argued that educators should

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<sup>78</sup> Roy Rosenzweig, "Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 93 (2006): 117–46.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Cullen J. Chandler and Alison S. Gregory, "Sleeping with the Enemy: Wikipedia in the College Classroom," *The History Teacher* 42 (February 2010): 247–57.

<sup>81</sup> For example, see Robert E. Cummings and Matt Barton, *Wiki Writing: Collaborative Learning in the College Classroom* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Robert W. Maloy, Michelle Poirier, Hilary K. Smith, and Sharon A. Edwards, "The Making of A History Standards Wiki: 'Covering, Uncovering,' and 'Discovering' Curriculum Frameworks Using a Highly Interactive Technology," *The History Teacher* 44, no. 1 (2010): 67–81.

<sup>82</sup> Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki, ed., *Writing History in the Digital Age* (Michigan University Press, 2013), accessed August 10, 2021, <https://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/>

<sup>83</sup> Martha Saxton, "Wikipedia and Women's History: A Classroom Experience," in *Writing History in the Digital Age*.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Amanda Seligman, "Teaching Wikipedia without Apologies," in *Writing History in the Digital Age*.

not only teach students how to make historical arguments, but also how to weigh up the value of one argument against another in order to acquire a more rounded critical perspective.<sup>86</sup> In the same book, the historian Shawn Graham described the ways in which an article on Wikipedia can be improved, to teach students “how knowledge can be crowd-sourced, produced, and disseminated” in the digital age.<sup>87</sup>

Over time, additional studies focused on the history of Wikipedia and its methods for the collection and production of knowledge. The work of the digital media strategist and journalism scholar Andrew Lih was published in 2009 and constituted the first popular history of Wikipedia.<sup>88</sup> Lih investigated the history of Wikipedia, its development over time, and shed light on the community of Wikipedians.<sup>89</sup> The contents of his work ranges from short biographies of Jimmy Wales and other Wikipedia founders to different important events in Wikipedia’s history. In 2011, the media theorists Geert Lovink and Nathaniel Tkacz edited a collective work that contained several chapters analyzing Wikipedia.<sup>90</sup> This study constituted a significant work on the production of knowledge on Wikipedia and all its chapters examined interesting aspects of Wikipedia. In particular, the chapter by the historian Dan O’Sullivan traced the history of encyclopedias in Western tradition and situated the emergence of Wikipedia within that historical context.<sup>91</sup> The historian Peter Burke also placed Wikipedia within the broader history of knowledge by tracing different ways of gathering, analyzing, disseminating, and employing knowledge.<sup>92</sup> Burke argued that Wikipedia’s knowledge is based on the methods of a “citizen science,” a scientific – in the broad sense of the term “science” – research conducted by amateurs and nonprofessional scientists. This process is described by Peter Burke as an “amateurization” of knowledge, which signifies a new phase in both knowledge production and collection, as well as in users’ involvement.<sup>93</sup> Following a similar line of thinking, the Ph.D. dissertation by the media scholar, Fethi Erinc Salor, *Sum of all Knowledge: Wikipedia and the*

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86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*.

89 Ibid., 12.

90 Geert Lovink and Nathaniel Tkacz, ed., *Critical Point of View. A Wikipedia Reader* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Culture, 2011).

91 Dan O’Sullivan, “What is an Encyclopedia? A Brief Historical Overview from Pliny to Wikipedia,” in *Critical Point of View. A Wikipedia Reader*, 34–49. On the same topic, see also Dan O’Sullivan, *Wikipedia. A New Community of Practice?* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).

92 Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge. From the Encyclopedie to Wikipedia* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 2012), 273–4.

93 Ibid., 273.

*Encyclopedic Urge* (2012), examined the history of Wikipedia with a focus on it as a new form of encyclopedia.<sup>94</sup> In her recent work, *Should You Believe Wikipedia? Online Communities and the Construction of Knowledge* (2022), the computing scholar Amy Bruckman explored the characteristics of online communities that define the construction of knowledge, such as collaboration, identity, privacy, social roles, accuracy, online behavior, etc.<sup>95</sup> In her analysis, Bruckman used Wikipedia as an example of an online community and focused on its design and structure.

In *Consuming History. Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, Jerome de Groot explored different forms of public and popular history and investigated how the past is represented in these forms.<sup>96</sup> His book included a chapter on digital history websites and Wikipedia. He analyzed the history of Wikipedia as a digital source of knowledge and traced the main methods that Wikipedia uses to produce knowledge.<sup>97</sup> The chapter is more of a history of Wikipedia rather than an analysis of history on Wikipedia, even though he offers a good description of the platform and situates it within the field of public history along with other popular histories (games, tv shows, movies, etc.). Also, the Ph.D. dissertation by the historian Despoina Valatsou, *The Emergence of New Sites of Memory on the Internet* (2014), studied diverse kinds of “memory websites” where historical content and information are produced not only by professional historians but increasingly by a public audience. Valatsou examined Wikipedia as a site of memory and analyzed its different guidelines.<sup>98</sup> This work is significant in terms of the historiography of Wikipedia; however, Valatsou did not perform an analysis of specific case studies to show how Wikipedia users remember the past or how they get involved in the production of historical knowledge. Instead, she explored how Wikipedia works and its broader conceptual ideas about history. Valatsou’s work is based on the interesting study of Robert S. Wolff, which explores how digital technologies have transformed the writing of history.<sup>99</sup> Wolff used the famous concept of Pierre Nora

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94 Fethi Erinç Salor, *Sum of all Knowledge: Wikipedia and the Encyclopedic Urge* (Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, 2012).

95 Amy S. Bruckman, *Should You Believe Wikipedia? Online Communities and the Construction of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

96 Groot, *Consuming History*, 93–8.

97 *Ibid.*, 90–101.

98 Despoina Valatsou, *Ανάδυση νέων μνημονικών τόπων στο διαδίκτυο* (Ph.D. diss., National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2014).

99 Robert S. Wolff, “The Historian’s Craft, Popular Memory, and Wikipedia,” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*.

and examined Wikipedia as a virtual “site of memory,” that is, a place where people try to make sense of past events.<sup>100</sup> According to Wolff, writing history in the digital era and in public spaces such as Wikipedia forces professional historians to share a space with others whose narratives come from their memories. His study is significant as it connected Wikipedia with memory; however, it did not manage to show that the complexity of Wikipedia as a system of historical knowledge production is not only the result of personal and collective memories but also compliance with specific rules and policies.

Regarding the third category, several works examined the structure of the Wikipedia community by first exploring its participatory and collaborative practices, open character, and hierarchy, but also later the biases and gender gap evident in its contents. Specifically, the communication scholar Joseph Michael Reagle Jr. studied the “good faith culture” that exists within the community by conducting an ethnographic analysis of Wikipedia.<sup>101</sup> He argued that the “neutral point of view” (NPOV) policy brings users together to create and edit Wikipedia pages and the “good faith culture” facilitates this process of collaboration.<sup>102</sup> This does not mean that Wikipedia is always harmonious, but that collaborators have the purpose to work toward openness, universalism, and good faith.<sup>103</sup> Regarding all those critics who have raised concerns about the deterioration of Wikipedia, Reagle mentioned that Wikipedia acknowledges and discusses this criticism and strives to constantly change.<sup>104</sup> In this way, Wikipedia has become a self-regulated community. Another significant study on how authority on Wikipedia works is the chapter by the communication scholar Mathieu O’Neil, “Wikipedia and Authority”.<sup>105</sup> O’Neil explored Wikipedia’s organizational structure to show how the distribution of power and authority takes shape across the online encyclopedia.<sup>106</sup> He argued that Wikipedia is representative of a new kind of organization, termed an “online tribal bureaucracy,” which contributes to the creation of an “online peer production project” that tries to manage the critiques expressed by its users.<sup>107</sup> O’Neil pointed out that

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**100** Ibid. On Wikipedia as a global memory place, also see Christian Pentzold, “Fixing the floating gap: The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia as a global memory place,” *Memory Studies* 2, no. 2 (May 2009): 255–72.

**101** Joseph Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration. The Culture of Wikipedia* (London, England and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

**102** Ibid., 169.

**103** Ibid., 170.

**104** Ibid., 173.

**105** Mathieu O’Neil, “Wikipedia and Authority,” in *Critical Point of View. A Wikipedia Reader*, 309–24.

**106** Ibid.

**107** Ibid., 320.

both the considerable size of Wikipedia and the lack of a constitution to assign specific roles to its users restrict its democratic character.<sup>108</sup>

Regarding the participation of Wikipedia users, the political scientist Johanna Niesyto interviewed the Hebrew Wikipedia user Drork Kamir to discuss how he became involved in Wikipedia, his interests, and the reasons for his active involvement.<sup>109</sup> Kamir admitted how different the Hebrew Wikipedia is in comparison to the Arabic version, and how the reactions to his comments by users changed from one platform to another.<sup>110</sup> Following the same perspective, the media theorist Nathaniel Tkacz conducted an interview with Edgar Enyedy, an active Wikipedia user from 2001 to 2002.<sup>111</sup> Enyedy argued that Wikipedia has been a “hierarchical social network, behind an unreliable knowledge repository,” as “it has reduced the minimal requirements of knowledge to below average in both quality and reliability”.<sup>112</sup> The work of the media scholar José van Dijck also examined Wikipedia by placing it within the context of connectivity.<sup>113</sup> He showed that Wikipedia’s success lies in the fact that it can mobilize different types of users to contribute to its contents.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, Wikipedia users find in Wikipedia a space for socialization, which enhances user’s mobilization.<sup>115</sup> His study is not only limited to the human users of Wikipedia, but also examines the important role of bots and non-human agents in the production of content on Wikipedia.<sup>116</sup> One of the few studies that focuses on Wikipedia users’ participation, by exploring the discussions on the “talk pages,” is an article by René König, “Wikipedia. Between lay participation and elite knowledge representation”.<sup>117</sup> König focuses on the talk pages connected to the German Wikipedia entry for the September 11 attacks, and argues that all related alternative theories pertaining to the events of September 11 are confined to the “talk pages”

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**108** Ibid. 321.

**109** Dror Kamir and Johanna Niesyto, “User Drork: A call for a free content alternative for sources,” in *Critical Point of View. A Wikipedia Reader*, 288–95.

**110** Ibid., 289.

**111** Edgar Enyedy and Nathaniel Tkacz, “‘Good luck with your wikiPAIDia’: Reflections on the 2002 Fork of the Spanish Wikipedia,” in *Critical Point of View. A Wikipedia Reader*, 110–18.

**112** Ibid., 118.

**113** José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity. A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Sabine Niederer and José van Dijck, “Wisdom of the Crowd or technicity of the content? Wikipedia as a sociotechnical system,” *new media & society* 12, no. 8 (2010): 1368–87.

**114** van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 136.

**115** Ibid.

**116** Ibid., 137.

**117** René König, “Wikipedia. Between lay participation and elite knowledge representation,” *Information, Community & Society* 16, no. 2 (2013): 160–77.

and do not appear in the main article, the editing process of which remains transparent.<sup>118</sup> However, the participatory structure of Wikipedia does not necessarily mean more democratic and inclusive practices.<sup>119</sup>

Another significant work on the participatory culture of Wikipedia is the book by the media and management scholar, Dariusz Jemielniak, who was also an active Wikipedia editor.<sup>120</sup> In his work, he explored the roles of conflict and debate in the development of an article, the “edit wars,” peer and bureaucratic control, which challenge the common assumption that Wikipedia is completely free, the development of trust in procedures, the organizational design, and the evolution of leadership within the Wikipedia community.<sup>121</sup> Jemielniak argued that Wikipedia balances open access and users’ power with a set of traditional organizational forms. This is how Wikipedia manages to be successful and attractive to participants.<sup>122</sup> In his work, the media theorist Nataniel Tkacz explored Wikipedia’s concept of openness by placing it within a political and historical context.<sup>123</sup> He argued that Wikipedia is not just characterized by collaboration and participation but by hierarchical structures and power relations between its users.<sup>124</sup> Tkacz connected Wikipedia with neoliberalism and argued that Wikipedia’s model as a space “without politics” is, in fact, a “post-political space”.<sup>125</sup> Tkacz’s analysis is very useful for this book as it presents Wikipedia not just as a simple public space, but as a space where power relations are embedded. At the same time, even though his arguments about neoliberalism and Wikipedia accurately reflect many of the strategies Wikipedia adopts and the logic behind them, it is something of an exaggeration to identify Wikipedia as a representative example of neoliberalism, especially in our current data-driven and attention-targeted digital world.

In 2010, the information science scholars Noriko Hara, Pnina Shachaf, and Khe Foon Hew analyzed how Wikipedia communities change across different languages.<sup>126</sup> The authors made a comparative examination of typical behaviors on the discussion pages of non-English Wikipedia communities. They aimed to show

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118 Ibid., 160, 173.

119 Ibid., 173.

120 Dariusz Jemielniak, *Common Knowledge? An Ethnography of Wikipedia* (Stanford University Press, 2014).

121 Ibid., 6.

122 Ibid.

123 Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*.

124 Ibid., 6.

125 Ibid., 4–7.

126 Noriko Hara, Pnina Shachaf, Khe Foon Hew, “Cross cultural analysis of the Wikipedia community,” *Journal of the American Society of Information Science and Technology* 61 (2010): 2097–108.

the differences and similarities of Wikipedia communities through an examination of different cultural patterns. A few years later, Noriko Hara and Pnina Schachaf produced a collective study of Wikipedia, in which they followed a global approach for the examination of Wikipedia.<sup>127</sup> The book includes several comparative studies of Wikipedia in more than one language and case studies of Wikipedia in languages other than English.<sup>128</sup> Its chapters focus on the content, processes, structures, and policies of Wikipedia. In the same thematic area, an article by the translation scholar Henry Jones explored the role of translation in the production of knowledge on Wikipedia.<sup>129</sup> For Jones, Wikipedia articles include a series of activities, such as “translating, collating, summarizing and synthesizing” based on sources published in different languages.<sup>130</sup> As such, Wikipedia editors, who are engaged in these practices, are not just “information bridges,” rather they are active and engaged participants occupying important roles in the production of knowledge.<sup>131</sup>

Some scholars also applied computational tools to the study of the Wikipedia community. For example, a professor of Game Design, William Emigh, and a professor of Linguistics, Susan Herring, used corpus linguistic methods and factor analysis for word counts to identify features of formality and informality.<sup>132</sup> They showed how user actions through the mechanisms of the system may (or may not) shape the contents of Wikipedia and Everything2 (online community of users).<sup>133</sup> For the authors, Wikipedia works as a concise encyclopedia in a very similar way to an expert-based encyclopedia, but it also contains “talk pages” that provide a more personal perspective on the production of knowledge.<sup>134</sup> Others, such as the physicists Csilla Rudas and János Török, have focused on how editors change the consensus-building process on Wikipedia.<sup>135</sup> They used an agent-based

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127 Pnina Fichman and Noriko Hara, ed., *Global Wikipedia: International and Cross-Cultural Issues in Online Collaboration* (Lanham: Rowman et Littlefield, 2014), 1.

128 Ibid.

129 Henry Jones and جونز هنري, “‘Wikipedia,’ Translation, and the Collaborative Production of Spatial Knowledge / الفضائية المعرفة إنتاج في والتشارك والترجمة ويكيبيديا,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 38 (2018): 264–97.

130 Ibid., 272.

131 Ibid., 271.

132 W. Emigh and S. C. Herring, “Collaborative Authoring on the Web: A Genre Analysis of Online Encyclopedias,” in *Proceedings of the 38th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (Los Alamitos: IEEE Press, 2005), 1.

133 Ibid.

134 Ibid., 10.

135 Csilla Rudas and János Török, “Modeling the Wikipedia to Understand the Dynamics of Long Disputes and Biased Articles,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 43, no. 1 (163) (2018): 72.



opinion model and showed that banning agents from editing reduces the consensus-building process and increases the system's relaxation time.<sup>136</sup>

In the last few years, there has been an increasing volume of works on the subject of bias and the gender gap on Wikipedia. For example, in their chapter “Gender Gap in Wikipedia Editing: A Cross-Language Comparison,” the information scholars Paolo Massa and Asta Zelenkauskaitė explore the gender gap across different versions of Wikipedia and try to establish if the gender gap in other language editions of Wikipedia is as pronounced as it is in the English one.<sup>137</sup> Their main argument is that the gender gap on Wikipedia reflects the broader gender gap across the sciences.<sup>138</sup> In the same collective work, H el ene Bourdeloie and Micha el Vicente examine the gender gap on Wikipedia as a reflection of broader gender inequalities across society.<sup>139</sup> Their study is based on the notion that the gender gap exists across all versions of Wikipedia, and as such Wikipedia reproduces existing gender inequalities within society.<sup>140</sup> This argument ignores the active agency of Wikipedia users and the intervening role that Wikipedia itself plays in the digital world.<sup>141</sup> Along similar lines, the sociologists Julia Adams, Hannah Bruckner, and Cambria Naslund investigate the extent of underrepresentation on Wikipedia, especially in relation to women and people of color, by examining American sociologists on Wikipedia.<sup>142</sup> Even though there is diversity within the discipline of sociology, on Wikipedia most represented sociologists are white men.<sup>143</sup> Their paper reveals the mechanisms that are responsible for these gaps on Wikipedia, such as gatekeeping practices, deletion of articles about women, the policy of “no original research,”

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136 Ibid.

137 Paolo Massa and Asta Zelenkauskaitė, “Gender Gap in Wikipedia Editing: A Cross-Language Comparison,” in *Global Wikipedia: International and Cross-Cultural Issues in Online Collaboration*, 85–96.

138 Ibid., 95.

139 H el ene Bourdeloie and Micha el Vicente, “Contributing to Wikipedia: A Question of Gender,” in *Global Wikipedia: International and Cross-Cultural Issues in Online Collaboration*, 148.

140 Ibid., 147, 157.

141 For the intervening role of Wikipedia, see Heather Ford, *Writing the Revolution. Wikipedia and the Survival of Facts in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press, 2022), 18.

142 Julia Adams, Hannah Bruckner, and Cambria Naslund, “Who Counts as a Notable Sociologist on Wikipedia? Gender, Race, and the ‘Professor Test’,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5 (2019): 1–14. See also Wei Luo, Julia Adams, and Hannah Brueckner, “The Ladies Vanish? American Sociology and the Genealogy of its Missing Women on Wikipedia,” *Comparative Sociology* 17, no. 5 (2018): 519–56; Julia Adams and Hannah Bruckner, “Wikipedia, Sociology, and the Promise of Big Data,” *Big Data & Society* (July–December 2015): 1–5.

143 Julia Adams, et al., “Who Counts as a Notable Sociologist on Wikipedia?” 1.

etc.<sup>144</sup> One of the latest works on Wikipedia is the collective study by the communication scholar Joseph Reagle and the social scientist Jackie Koerner, *Wikipedia @20. Stories of an Incomplete Revolution*, which explores multiple topics related to Wikipedia but focuses mainly on the problems of diversity, bias, and the gender gap.<sup>145</sup> In one of the chapters, Jackie Koerner examines Wikipedia's problem with bias, which produces an unfriendly environment for its users.<sup>146</sup> For Koerner, bias exists all throughout Wikipedia's contents, policies, and in the participation of its users.<sup>147</sup> As a result, Koerner suggests that Wikipedia should restrict all those policies and focus instead on how it will become more inclusive.<sup>148</sup>

More recently, while Wikipedia has established partnerships with various other digital platforms, such as Google, Amazon, Apple, etc., there have been a number of works that have approached Wikipedia by seeking to place it into the broader context of the datafied digital world.<sup>149</sup> For example, the study by the media scholar Heather Ford examines how Wikipedia covered the 2011 Egyptian

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**144** Ibid., 8–11.

**145** Joseph Reagle and Jackie Koerner, ed., *Wikipedia @20. Stories of an Incomplete Revolution* (Massachusetts: MIT Press 2020), accessed August 10, 2021, <https://wikipedia20.mitpress.mit.edu/> On the problem of bias and the gender gap, and the need for Wikipedia to become more inclusive and diverse, see Heather Ford and Judy Wajcman, “‘Anyone can edit’, not everyone does: Wikipedia’s infrastructure and the gender gap,” *Social Studies of Science* 47, no. 4 (2017): 511–27; Alexandria Lockett, “Why do I have Authority to Edit the Page? The Politics of User Agency and Participation on Wikipedia,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Siân Evans, Jacqueline Mabey, Michael Mandiberg, Melissa Tamani, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Community,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Adele Vrana, Anasuya Sengupta, Siko Bouterse, “Towards a Wikipedia For and From Us All,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Jina Valentine, Eliza Myrie, and Heather Hart, “The Myth of the Comprehensive Historical Archive,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Matthew A. Vetter, “Possible Enlightenment: Wikipedia’s Encyclopedic Promise and Epistemological Failure,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Ian A. Ramjohn and LiAnna L. Davis, “Equity, Policy, and Newcomers: Five Journeys from Wiki Education,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Katherine Maher, “Capstone: Making History, Building the Future Together,” in *Wikipedia @20*.

**146** Jackie Koerner, “Wikipedia Has a Bias Problem,” in *Wikipedia @20*.

**147** Ibid.

**148** Ibid.

**149** For Wikipedia’s partnerships, see Heather Ford, “Rise of the Underdog,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Rachel Withers, “Amazon Owes Wikipedia Big-Data,” *Slate* (October 11, 2018), accessed August 10, 2021, <https://slate.com/technology/2018/10/amazon-echo-wikipedia-wikimedia-donation.html>; Emma Roth, “Google is paying the Wikimedia Foundation for better access to information,” *The Verge* (June 22, 2022), accessed July 23, 2023, <https://www.theverge.com/2022/6/22/23178245/google-paying-wikimedia-foundation-information>; Noam Cohen, “Wikipedia Is Finally Asking Big Tech to Pay Up,” *Wired* (March 16, 2021), accessed July 23, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/wikipedia-finally-ask-ing-big-tech-to-pay-up/>

revolution while it was taking place.<sup>150</sup> Ford discerns a shift in terms of Wikipedia's broader function, from being an encyclopedia to more of a "data project" that does not consist of "facts" but of "factual data" due to Wikipedia's connections with Google.<sup>151</sup> As data is collected on Wikipedia, particularly while an event is taking place, struggles over that data and its meanings then appear.<sup>152</sup> For this reason, Wikipedia, as a central digital knowledge infrastructure, does not only reflect the existing world; instead, it actively intervenes and constructs the world we live in.<sup>153</sup> Ford's work is one of the few studies on Wikipedia that has taken advantage of the editing history and "talk pages" of Wikipedia articles. Another study that has placed Wikipedia into the broader context of a datafied digital world is the article by the media scholar Steve Jankowski, who explores how Wikipedia has intersected with other digital projects, such as Google Search and AI software, in the last twenty years.<sup>154</sup>

The historiography of Wikipedia reveals a broader shift from studies that examined the accuracy of Wikipedia in the production of knowledge to studies that focused on how Wikipedia works, its policies, structures, participatory culture, to more current works on how Wikipedia can become more diverse and inclusive and how it provides data to other digital platforms. All these works provide a useful context for my research, but their combined nature also reveals the lack of works on Wikipedia users' involvement in the production of historical knowledge. Both the engagement of people with the production of historical knowledge and the opportunity that everyone can write their own opinions about history constitute important aspects that are often marginalized or neglected by the above-mentioned studies. This perspective is significant if we consider that the main feature of Wikipedia is the "amateurization" of knowledge, as the British historian Peter Burke has argued.<sup>155</sup> We cannot have a complete understanding of how Wikipedia works without examining and, more importantly, asking its main protagonists, the Wikipedia editors, about their engagement with the production of historical knowledge and their participation within the Wikipedia community.

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150 Ford, *Writing the Revolution*, 11–12.

151 *Ibid.*, 12.

152 *Ibid.*

153 *Ibid.*, 18.

154 Steve Jankowski, "The Wikipedia Imaginaire: A New Media History beyond Wikipedia.Org (2001–2022)," *Internet Histories* (August 12, 2023): 1–21.

155 Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge*, 273.

## Chapter outline

The book consists of five chapters, each chapter exploring different aspects of the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia. The research takes advantage of multiple methods, ranging from qualitative analysis and surveys to quantitative approaches. The book is based on an examination of multiple Wikipedia pages that constantly get updates and change. Therefore, it is possible that many of the examined pages will not reflect the most recently updated versions when this book comes to be read. I mention my last visit to each page in the footnotes. Also, in most cases, I do not study Wikipedia pages by placing them into a timeline or linear narrative; instead, I approach them based on the structure, layout, and narrative (including hyperlinks) that Wikipedia provides.

Specifically, Chapter 1 focuses on history as a subject category of Wikipedia and explores the broader system of Wikipedia. It aims to show how Wikipedia allows editors to produce historical knowledge, what tools Wikipedia provides them, which policies and guidelines it has established, and how it manages to encourage users to actively engage with Wikipedia's contents. Its methodology is based on a qualitative analysis of English-language Wikipedia pages, which refer to the guidelines and methods of Wikipedia.

Chapters 2 and 3 investigate the agency of Wikipedia users by exploring how they engage with history and contribute to the production of history. Both chapters focus on four case studies, four traumatic historical events that have shaped modern history in the United States and have had a significant impact on the world: the Great Depression, the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Vietnam War, and the September 11 attacks. The second chapter examines the production of history on the pages relating to the Great Depression and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while the third chapter analyzes the Vietnam War and September 11 attacks. The point of this division is to ascertain whether there are any differences in the users' engagement with history between these four case studies. In both chapters, I study the main pages connected to these historical events on Wikipedia and their related "talk pages" to highlight the discussions and debates about history between the Wikipedia editors involved.

Chapter 4 studies the characteristics of Wikipedia users who contribute to pages related to history, the volume of edits they make, their interests, experiences, and educational background, which prompts them to take part in the Wikipedia community and to produce historical knowledge. By applying a network analysis of thousands of historical pages on Wikipedia, I detect repeating patterns that reveal why Wikipedia editors decide to contribute to pages related to history, the wider interests of these editors, and their identities as they are promoted within the Wikipedia community. At the same time, by examining the number of

edits Wikipedians make and the centrality of Wikipedia editors within a network, I reveal the different kinds of editors there are, their various roles, and their level of power, which define the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia. This chapter is based on the relevant pages from three separate categories relating to modern United States history: “History of organizations based in the United States,” “History of science and technology in the United States,” and “LGBT history in the United States”.<sup>156</sup>

Chapter 5 examines the experiences of Wikipedians, who create and edit historical pages on Wikipedia. By doing survey research and asking Wikipedians themselves, this chapter provides an overview of Wikipedia users’ engagement with history, their editing experiences, the reasons why they edit, their historical interests, their criteria to edit or create a historical page, their personal relation to the historical topics they edit, their educational background, their collaboration with other editors, and their activity within the – history related – WikiProjects. The results of the survey and the stories that participants shared in their responses provide some answers as to why Wikipedians get involved in the production of history and how they view the past they create or edit.

Overall, this book presents Wikipedia as a “sociotechnical system” that manages to engage a public audience that then becomes an active agent in the production of historical knowledge.<sup>157</sup> The engagement of the public with history is based on scholarship, personal experiences, intimate relations to the past, emotions, negotiations between users, and is governed by a community-authored set of guidelines and practices. However, that engagement does not always result in the production of historical knowledge. Even though Wikipedia allows all its users to comment on the editing process of a Wikipedia article, to express their own historical understandings on the relevant “talk pages,” and to discuss the representation of history, few of them – the most experienced editors and some non-human agents – can make their contributions part of the main article.

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156 For these three categories, see “Category:History of organizations based in the United States,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:History\\_of\\_organizations\\_based\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:History_of_organizations_based_in_the_United_States); “Category:History of science and technology in the United States,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:History\\_of\\_science\\_and\\_technology\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:History_of_science_and_technology_in_the_United_States); “Category:LGBT history in the United States,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:LGBT\\_history\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:LGBT_history_in_the_United_States)

157 For the term “sociotechnical system” in relation to Wikipedia, see Niederer and van Dijck, “Wisdom of the Crowd or technicity of the content?”.

# Chapter 1

## Framing the Production of Historical knowledge on Wikipedia: Policies, Guidelines, Rules, Hierarchy, and History

We cannot understand how historical knowledge is produced on Wikipedia without knowing how Wikipedia works, how it appeared in the digital and public sphere, what rules it has established to produce knowledge. The aim of this chapter is to shed light on how the Wikipedia community collects and disseminates knowledge, what tools it uses, how Wikipedia editors decide which pages they will create or edit, and what is the hierarchy of users within that community. Wikipedia as an encyclopedia includes subjects ranging from mathematics and biology to sports, culture, and the arts. Even though all guidelines and hierarchical structures are common for all its subjects, there are particular modifications and rules for each subject. Each content category constitutes a small, consolidated community within the broader community of Wikipedia.

In this chapter, my analysis will focus on history as a content subject category of Wikipedia, but at the same time, I will explore the broader system of Wikipedia to examine the relation between Wikipedia's world and the production of historical knowledge within the Wikipedia community. The chapter aims to show how Wikipedia allows editors to produce historical knowledge, what tools Wikipedia provides them, which policies and guidelines it includes, and how it manages to motivate Wikipedia users to actively engage with its contents.

More specifically, I will firstly examine the historical context in which Wikipedia was founded and the major technological and epistemological influences that shape its identity. Secondly, I will analyze the policies, guidelines, and rules of Wikipedia and explore how they determine the production of historical knowledge. Wikipedia is not an empty box; instead, it provides both editors and users with a framework of interaction for its contents and behavior within the community. The public agency of Wikipedia users is determined by a set of rules established by the Wikimedia Foundation, the organization that funds Wikipedia and other related projects.<sup>1</sup> These rules allow specific types of engagement with history and, thus, define the production of historical knowledge. At the same time, the policies of Wikipedia reveal how the online encyclopedia has perceived his-

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<sup>1</sup> See "Wikimedia Foundation," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikimedia\\_Foundation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikimedia_Foundation)

tory in the last twenty years of its existence. Thirdly, I will investigate the hierarchy that exists within the Wikipedia community and show how that hierarchy affects users' engagement with history. Lastly, I will examine history as a content category and the related WikiProjects that Wikipedia users interested in history have created. My main argument here is that a community-authored set of guidelines and practices enables and encourages the active agency of Wikipedia users within the Wikipedia community. However, these policies create a multilayered system of bureaucracy and surveillance that controls users' behaviors within the community, checks the quality of its contents, and supervises the editors' role in the production of historical knowledge.

## The historical context of Wikipedia

Wikipedia itself has constructed its own history by creating a page about its relationship with other epistemological and technological developments. In that way, Wikipedia connects itself with different encyclopedic traditions and the broader history of knowledge and technology. According to the page, "History of Wikipedia," Wikipedia claims to have its roots in the Libraries of Alexandria and Pergamum, but its function is based on the printed encyclopedia of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, and other eighteenth-century French encyclopedists.<sup>2</sup> As the historian Peter Burke has argued, *Encyclopédie* and other eighteenth-century encyclopedias signified a broader reform in the organization of knowledge itself, which became systematic and based on "research" and "improvement".<sup>3</sup> In these encyclopedias, knowledge became secular and covered topics from agriculture to education.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, even though Diderot and d'Alembert argued that there are several possible systems of knowledge and thus challenged the model of the tree, which was the dominant system of knowledge organization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they organized the knowledge of the *Encyclopédie* by using a diagram of a tree.<sup>5</sup> The tree signified that knowledge has specific roots and a single order.

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<sup>2</sup> "History of Wikipedia," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 16, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Wikipedia#Background](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Wikipedia#Background)

<sup>3</sup> Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge*, 254–5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Ahnert, Sebastien E. Ahnert, Catherine Nicole Coleman, and Scott B. Weingart, *The Network Turn. Changing Perspectives in the Humanities* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 30.

Wikipedia also clarifies that its influences are not limited to the encyclopedists of the eighteenth century but are also connected to several personalities of the twentieth century, who were devoted to compiling the world's knowledge in a single location.<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia refers to Paul Otlet, a Belgian information activist, who challenged the tree as a model for knowledge organization and argued that knowledge is a network, an interconnected web.<sup>7</sup> Thus, knowledge does not have a specific root but is interconnected.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, Otlet created the Universal Decimal Classification Scheme to show the “multidimensionality of knowledge relationships” that the tree system could not present.<sup>9</sup> Otlet also wrote several books; in one of them, the *Traité de documentation* published in 1934, he developed the idea of using automated machinery to build a more useful encyclopedia, and in 1910 he created the institution of Mundaneum to present new methods on how to collect and organize the world's knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Paul Otlet was one of the first figures who developed the idea that technology can produce, collect, and disseminate knowledge on an international scale.<sup>11</sup> This idea was based on the available technologies of his time, such as loose-leaf binders, index cards, and microphotography.<sup>12</sup>

Wikipedia also mentions two other personalities, H. G. Wells and Vannevar Bush, whom Wikipedia considers as its main ancestors.<sup>13</sup> Both figures are important not only for how Wikipedia presents itself, but also for how Wikipedia connects itself with the broader history of computing. Firstly, H. G. Wells was a British socialist, novelist, and science writer influenced by Paul Otlet's idea that knowledge can be classified flexibly and in multiple dimensions.<sup>14</sup> Wells did not agree with the narrow specialization of human knowledge and worked toward the creation of a World Encyclopedia, similar to what Diderot had accomplished in the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> For Wells, the World Encyclopedia should take the form of a network of people as a “World Brain”.<sup>16</sup> He started to develop his ideas about the concept of a

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6 “History of Wikipedia”.

7 Ahnert, et al., *The Network Turn*, 32.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 20.

12 Ibid., 21.

13 “History of Wikipedia”.

14 Martin Campbell-Kelly and William Aspray, *Computer: A History of the Information Machine* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2004), 256; Ahnert, et al., *The Network Turn*, 33.

15 Campbell-Kelly and Aspray, *Computer*, 256–7.

16 Ibid., 257.



machine-assisted encyclopedia in his book *World Brain* (1938).<sup>17</sup> Both Otlet and Wells focused on the technologies of their time and developed an international vision for knowledge.<sup>18</sup> They expressed the idea of a universal encyclopedia based on technology and large scale collaboration.<sup>19</sup> However, as the communication scholar Joseph Reagle has argued, this vision could not be fully accomplished with the available technology in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup>

Vannevar Bush was also an influential figure for the development of Wikipedia. As the historians Martin Campbell-Kelly and William Aspray outline, in the postwar United States, H. G. Wells first met Bush, a scientist and inventor, who had developed an analog computer and had become chief scientific adviser to the president and head of the Office of Scientific Research and Development.<sup>21</sup> During the 1940s, Bush was a prominent figure. He worked at MIT as an engineer and had an important influence on the government.<sup>22</sup> His greatest achievement was putting together the OSRD's army of scientists and university research laboratories, which offered the computational power required to win the war.<sup>23</sup> As the historian of technology Margaret O'Mara tells us, the Stanford engineer Frederick Emmons Terman was a Ph.D. student of Vannevar Bush at MIT and then became a faculty member at Stanford University.<sup>24</sup> Terman became Dean at Stanford and soon transformed Stanford into a high-tech university, which ultimately contributed to the economic development of the West.<sup>25</sup> Bush envisaged a personal information machine, a proto-hypertext device that he called the memex.<sup>26</sup> This machine could not only contain a lot of information but also make use of it. He defined the memex as "a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility".<sup>27</sup> However, the existing technologies of the period did not yet allow for the creation of such a network of computers.<sup>28</sup>

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17 "History of Wikipedia".

18 Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 24.

19 *Ibid.*, 26.

20 *Ibid.*, 27.

21 Campbell-Kelly, *Computer: A History of the Information Machine*, 257.

22 Margaret O'Mara, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 20.

23 *Ibid.*, 21.

24 *Ibid.*, 21.

25 *Ibid.*, 27–8.

26 Campbell-Kelly, *Computer: A History of the Information Machine*, 258.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, 259.

The other major influence on Wikipedia came from Ted Nelson, an American pioneer of information technology, philosopher, and sociologist, who introduced the concepts of hypertext and hypermedia through the Xanadu project, which appeared in 1960.<sup>29</sup> The Xanadu project was influenced by Bush's memex, allowing users to could create a document and make it available to others for editing.<sup>30</sup> Instead of several copies, users could make several edits on a single document and then store it. In addition, the Xanadu project allowed users to not only create links between various documents but to link whatever they wanted.<sup>31</sup> In the 1990s, however, the emergence of the Web led to a declining interest in the Xanadu project, as the Web became the dominant networked system.<sup>32</sup>

In the 1990s, the Internet had become a public communication tool and embraced several opportunities for information gathering, social interaction, entertainment, and self-expression.<sup>33</sup> The Internet had moved from military to civilian control and made the network more accessible to the broader public.<sup>34</sup> During that time, people continued talking about the creation of a free and universal Internet encyclopedia. The major projects of that decade were the Interpedia of Rick Gates, which appeared as an idea in 1993, and the GNUPedia of Richard Stallman, which appeared in 2000.<sup>35</sup> In the 1990s, more and more universities and companies started using emails and Usenet, so the idea of Interpedia was based on these developments.<sup>36</sup> However, the project was never completed, as its members were not very active in mailing and Usenet groups.<sup>37</sup> The project managed to introduce the idea that anyone can create articles and a decentralized system can check the quality of these articles.<sup>38</sup> This system will not accept or reject an article but will place a label upon it denoting whether or not the article is good. For Joseph Reagle, this project also introduced the notion that the overall editing process should be based on "good faith" collaboration, which Wikipedia will seek to integrate later.<sup>39</sup>

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29 Ibid.

30 Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 27; Belinda Barnet, *Memory Machines. The Evolution of Hypertext* (London, New York, Delhi: Anthem Press, 2013), 84–5.

31 Barnet, *Memory Machines*, 85.

32 Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 28.

33 Abbate, *Inventing the Internet*, 181.

34 Ibid.

35 Roy Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired: The Future of the Past in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 119.

36 Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 33.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 34.

39 Ibid.

The other influential project in terms of Wikipedia was Richard Stallman's GNUPed. Stallman was an important pioneer in the development of free and open-source software and a leading figure in the Free Software Movement.<sup>40</sup> In the 1970s, Stallman was a programmer at the Artificial Intelligence Lab at MIT and a prominent member of the then hacker culture, who left MIT and decided to create an entire operating system (OS) that would not follow the concept of closed software.<sup>41</sup> He also established a nonprofit company, the Free Software Foundation (FSF) to supervise this movement and create copyright licenses.<sup>42</sup> Other programmers followed that logic and started the Open Source Initiative (OSI).<sup>43</sup> Both FSF and OSI argued that the commodification of software reduced the liberties of the individuals who use it.<sup>44</sup> The free and open-source software (FOSS) created several new products, such as the Open Humanities Press, the Bentham Open project, Open Medicine, Open Courseware Consortium, Open Everything movement, etc.<sup>45</sup>

As previously mentioned, Stallman, who had envisioned the creation of an online encyclopedia, was part of the Free Software movement. The Free Software movement was based on the 1960s critique against the industrial-military complex that connected technology with centralization, violence, and hierarchy.<sup>46</sup> That movement promoted the idea that software should be free and should not belong to corporations and viewed the Internet as an open space for discussion and communication.<sup>47</sup> According to the GNU operating system website, "the free software movement campaigns to win for the users of computing the freedom that comes from free software. Free software puts its users in control of their own computing. Nonfree software puts its users under the power of the software's developer".<sup>48</sup> As it also states, "free software means the users have the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software".<sup>49</sup> Influenced by the developments in free and open-source software, Stallman pro-

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40 Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired*, 119.

41 Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*, 22.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 23.

44 Ibid., 25.

45 Ibid., 25–7.

46 O'Mara, *The Code*, 120–6; Thomas P. Hughes, *American Genesis. A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm 1870–1970* (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 1989), 11.

47 For a broader analysis of Free Software, see Christopher M. Kelty, *Two Bits. The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

48 "What is free software?" *GNU Operating System*, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.en.html>

49 Ibid.

posed GNUPedia in 2000 and it then appeared in 2001. According to Stallman's plan, each article should be written by a single author like on Interpedia.<sup>50</sup> He envisioned a decentralized system of knowledge without any central authority.<sup>51</sup> However, Stallman's vision remained very much in the proposal stage and the project was never fully realized.<sup>52</sup>

While Stallman was planning the creation of GNUPedia, Jimmy Wales was working on the creation of an online encyclopedia that would follow the structures of past encyclopedias, mainly the Encyclopedia Britannica.<sup>53</sup> The name of the encyclopedia that Jimmy Wales created was Nupedia and went online in September 2000.<sup>54</sup> However, Wales soon realized that the process of creating and editing articles on Nupedia demanded a lot of time, as each topic had to be studied professionally, so each article had to be sent to experts for review.<sup>55</sup> Wales has explained that the whole process "felt like homework".<sup>56</sup> During the first months of Nupedia, from September 2000 to the end of that year, there were only twenty-one articles online. Wales also hired Larry Sanger, who had finished his Ph.D. in Philosophy at Ohio State University and was actively participating in online mailing lists and Usenet discussion groups about the philosopher Ayn Rand and objectivism.<sup>57</sup> Sanger became the first paid editor in chief.<sup>58</sup>

Both Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, the two founders of Wikipedia, were also involved in the hacker culture of the early 1990s. In his childhood, Jimmy Wales played Dungeons & Dragons, a popular fantasy game of that period.<sup>59</sup> In the 1980s, a computer network, named Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) was created and allowed users not only to play games but also to create virtual fantasy worlds.<sup>60</sup> Wales became an active player of MUDs at Alabama during the 1980s and started to explore the opportunities of networked computers. He also participated in several online discussion forums.<sup>61</sup> In a similar context, Larry Sanger, as

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<sup>50</sup> Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>53</sup> Salor, *Sum of all Knowledge*, 93.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired*, 119.

<sup>56</sup> Stacy Schiff, "Know it all: Can Wikipedia Conquer Expertise," *The New Yorker*, July 31, 2006, accessed December 4, 2019, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/07/31/know-it-all>

<sup>57</sup> Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired*, 119.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>59</sup> Marshall Poe, "The Hive," *The Atlantic*, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/09/the-hive/305118/>

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

he has admitted, when he was young, also played computer games and coded an adventure game in BASIC, the first popular programming language.<sup>62</sup> Combining his interests in epistemology and programming, he created a mailing list, the Association for Systematic Philosophy, in which users could discuss philosophy and express their opinions on different philosophical issues.<sup>63</sup>

After the creation of Nupedia, Jimmy Wales and his colleagues became aware of the success of open-source software, so they decided to change the structure and the model of Nupedia and create an encyclopedia based on the tools of sharing and openness. In January 2001, Jimmy Wales learned about a website called WikiWikiWeb, which allowed “anyone to edit any page at any time,” as Andrew Lih explains, while no special software was needed and no log-in or password was required, and the changes on each page were saved immediately.<sup>64</sup> The WikiWikiWeb software was developed by the programmer Ward Cunningham in the 1990s and allowed anyone to create and edit a Web page.<sup>65</sup>

By mid-January 2001, Sanger and Wales had followed that model and changed the encyclopedia’s name to Wikipedia. From a free and online encyclopedia of experts, Wikipedia transformed into an encyclopedia where “anyone could edit any page at any time.”<sup>66</sup> Soon, Wikipedia managed to surpass Nupedia and create a new community of people, who actively engaged with its contents. Wales also created a discussion list for Wikipedia’s users to enhance the improvement of the project.<sup>67</sup> In late January, Wikipedia managed to have 17 articles, in late February it had 150 articles, in March 572, in April 835, in May 1,300, in June 1,700, in July 2,400, and in August, 3,700.<sup>68</sup> At the end of 2001, Wikipedia had 15,000 articles and 350 Wikipedia editors.<sup>69</sup> In late 2001, while a significant economic decline was taking place across the dot-com industry, Sanger was unable to receive his salary, so he continued working voluntarily on the project, but in March 2002 he officially resigned.<sup>70</sup> When Sanger stopped working on Wikipedia, he started making some

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62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Schiff, “Know it all”; Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*, 44, 61.

65 Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired*, 120.

66 Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*, 14.

67 Poe, “The Hive”.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*, 174–5.

claims about the encyclopedia's hostility toward experts and its problems with regard to accuracy.<sup>71</sup>

So why did Wikipedia become a successful free and online encyclopedia while all the previous efforts failed? Joseph Reagle offers an answer to that question. According to his analysis, Wikipedia was the project that managed to bring together all the ideas related to universal knowledge production, access to knowledge, and collaboration through its wiki technology.<sup>72</sup> The wiki was the most significant factor that propelled Wikipedia forward in comparison to previous technological and epistemological efforts. The wiki gave people the opportunity to edit the Web and offered tools for communication, documentation, contribution, reversion, and discussion.<sup>73</sup> In 2005, Jimmy Wales gave a talk about the emergence of Wikipedia and explained the basic logic behind the online encyclopedia.<sup>74</sup> He argued that the major technological feature of Wikipedia is the wiki technology, which gives power to anyone who wants to create content.<sup>75</sup>

As shown above, Wikipedia has managed to combine a series of older epistemological and technological developments and create a digital and public space that enables users to contribute to the production of (historical) knowledge. Wikipedia's influences, the history that presents itself, its relation to important figures in the context of the history of knowledge and computing, make it clear that Wikipedia incorporates an encyclopedic tradition and technological mechanisms, aiming to empower the public and make its users active agents in the compilation of human knowledge. However, before Wikipedia, most of these general concepts and ideas had either remained unrealized or had failed to take shape in any single concrete project that would attract long-term public interest. By borrowing ideas and innovations from the past and by taking advantage of contemporary technologies, Wikipedia managed to make users active participants in the collection, production, and dissemination of human knowledge. However, these technological features were not the only characteristics that made Wikipedia a digital public space, where a high number of people will be able to co-exist effectively and produce historical knowledge efficiently.

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<sup>71</sup> Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired*, 121. See also Larry Sanger's user profile on Wikipedia, in which he also explains his involvement: "User:Larry Sanger," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Larry\\_Sanger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Larry_Sanger)

<sup>72</sup> Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 42. Reagle clarifies that wiki technology was one of the important factors that made Wikipedia successful. Other factors were the NPOV policy, "culture of collaboration," "good faith social norms," and the role of the "benevolent dictator".

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>74</sup> Jimmy Wales, "The Birth of Wikipedia," *TED*, accessed December 10, 2020, [https://www.ted.com/talks/jimmy\\_wales\\_the\\_birth\\_of\\_wikipedia#t-176024](https://www.ted.com/talks/jimmy_wales_the_birth_of_wikipedia#t-176024)

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

## Organizing the chaos: Policies, guidelines, and rules on content and conduct

In 2003, Jimmy Wales created the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation aiming to supervise Wikipedia, which had grown significantly during that time, and to appoint the appropriate staff to run the online encyclopedia and other projects, such as the Wiktionary, and organize annual fundraising efforts.<sup>76</sup> Wales transferred all the rights of Wikipedia to the Wikimedia Foundation and created a board of trustees for the administration of the foundation.<sup>77</sup>

Since the creation of Wikipedia in 2001, there were few rules that determined both the production of Wikipedia's contents and the interaction between involved users.<sup>78</sup> However, the establishment of the Wikimedia Foundation gave a more formal organizing structure to Wikipedia, which expanded its rules and methods of knowledge production.<sup>79</sup> Wikipedia's structure includes policies and guidelines that focus on the content of Wikipedia and the users' conduct within the Wikipedia community. In this way, Wikipedia creates a framework of interaction for its users to better control users' behaviors within the Wikipedia community, check the quality of its contents, and, even more importantly, supervise the editors' role in the production of historical knowledge.

As Wikipedia itself clarifies, its policies and guidelines are developed by the Wikipedia community and reflect the consensus of the community.<sup>80</sup> As Phoebe Ayers has explained, the most experienced users of the community are those who determine the policies and guidelines to an important extent.<sup>81</sup> The policies and guidelines of Wikipedia have changed over time, as they respond to the needs and problems that Wikipedia faces. Unfortunately, there are no studies on how the Wikipedia community has developed its policies and guidelines since its creation in 2001. Nevertheless, as we can see in the works that have examined Wikipedia in the last two decades, there are some basic policies and guidelines, despite not having changed significantly over time, that define the creation of content and Wikipedians' behaviors. Those policies will be the subject of this chapter.

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<sup>76</sup> "Wikimedia Foundation"; Salor, *Sum of all Knowledge*, 98.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. See also "Board of Trustees," *Wikipedia*, accessed December 4, 2019, [https://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Board\\_of\\_Trustees](https://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Board_of_Trustees)

<sup>78</sup> Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*, 112–13.

<sup>79</sup> Salor, *Sum of all Knowledge*, 99.

<sup>80</sup> "Wikipedia:Policies and guidelines," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 3, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies\\_and\\_guidelines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies_and_guidelines)

<sup>81</sup> Phoebe Ayers, "Wikipedia and Libraries," in *Wikipedia @20*.

Wikipedia policies, guidelines, and rules appear on several of its pages and shape Wikipedia's system. Even though Wikipedia remains a chaotic digital space and it is almost impossible to analyze all its rules and policies, here I try to investigate those that Wikipedia considers as the most significant and those which are related to historical knowledge production. All the pages described below are interconnected, as each page includes hyperlinks, which serve as references to other pages and, in that way, provide more explanations on how Wikipedia works. There is not one singular page that contains all the guidelines and rules pertaining to Wikipedia. Instead, there is a network of policies, which appear on several pages and are interconnected through hyperlinks, so the user can jump from one page to the other and explore the universe of Wikipedia. Lastly, all the analyzed guidelines and policies refer to the English Wikipedia and cannot be applied to other Wikipedia editions.<sup>82</sup>

Wikipedia has three fundamental policies, the “neutral point of view” (NPOV), “verifiability” (V), and “no original research” (NOR).<sup>83</sup> These three policies constitute the three “core content policies” of Wikipedia, which “determine the type and quality of material that is acceptable in Wikipedia articles”.<sup>84</sup> In other words, these three content policies shape the character of knowledge – in this case study, historical knowledge – that Wikipedia collects, produces, and disseminates.

The policy of “neutral point of view” (NPOV) means that the content of Wikipedia articles should be neutral, fair, and without bias.<sup>85</sup> Wikipedia editors should not be biased, they should “describe disputes, but not engaged in them [sic]”.<sup>86</sup> As Jimmy Wales has explained, the policy of neutrality is determinant for the quality of Wikipedia, it was established at the very outset of Wikipedia and is non-negotiable.<sup>87</sup> NPOV does not prevent editors from writing their own opinions about the related topics; instead, it forces them to present a more balanced narrative. As Wales has mentioned, Wikipedia does not emphasize truth, as truth itself is subjective.<sup>88</sup> Wikipedia emphasizes neutrality, which is a “social concept of co-operation.”<sup>89</sup> As such, the goal of neutrality is to show what different editors have written about a topic and, in this way, encourage them to work together.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> “Wikipedia: Core content policies”.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> “Wikipedia:Neutral point of view,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 3, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral\\_point\\_of\\_view](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view)

<sup>87</sup> Wales, “The Birth of Wikipedia”.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



The principle of NPOV does not exist only on Wikipedia, it is also connected to other epistemological fields. If we think about historical scholarship in Wikipedia's terms, we notice that the notion of objectivity has been strongly connected to the study of history. As the philosopher of history Herman Paul suggests, objectivity in the discipline of history is connected with the detachment of historians' feelings, opinions, and biases, which have traditionally been regarded as a virtue for historians and as "a sine qua non for epistemic success".<sup>91</sup> In a more extensive analysis of objectivity, the historians Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza argue that, since the professionalization of historical studies in the late nineteenth century, the concept of objectivity has become strongly connected to history and the work of historians.<sup>92</sup> The modern conception of objectivity means the use of footnotes, bibliographies, and different types of primary sources.<sup>93</sup> However, in the mid-twentieth century, several historians challenged the idea of objectivity, as being something impossible to attain, and replaced it with the concept of "impartiality".<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, many historians argued that objectivity is crucial for the work of the historian, even though it is difficult to achieve.<sup>95</sup> Wikipedia values objectivity in terms of producing balanced and non-biased historical narratives based on "verifiable sources". This feature is not radically different from how scholars tend to approach historical knowledge, even if it is more like a nineteenth-century characteristic of historical studies.

The content policy of "verifiability" refers to the sources that Wikipedia editors should use to find information and produce knowledge.<sup>96</sup> That policy is important for the perception of history within the Wikipedia community. As the historian Despoina Valatsou writes, the concept of "verifiability" replaces the con-

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91 Herman Paul, "What is a scholarly persona? Ten theses on virtues, skills, and desires," *History and Theory* 53 (2014): 361.

92 Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza, "Introduction: The Cultural History of Historical Thought," in *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, ed. Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 809. Kramer and Maza also mention that the relation between objectivity and history is even older and comes before the modern era.

93 *Ibid.*, 9. On the relation between history and "objectivity," see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); Otis Graham, et al., "The Ideal of Objectivity' and the Profession of History," *Public Historian* 13 (1991): 9–23. For the broader concept of "objectivity" and its transformations over time, see Loraine Daston and Peter Galiston, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

94 *Ibid.*

95 *Ibid.*

96 "Wikipedia: Verifiability," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability>

cept of truth on Wikipedia.<sup>97</sup> In other words, for Wikipedia, the most significant thing is not to produce “true” knowledge, as truth can be a contested notion.<sup>98</sup> The historian Marshall Poe provides a thought-provoking definition of the truth on Wikipedia:

The power of the community to decide, of course, asks us to reexamine what we mean when we say that something is ‘true.’ We tend to think of truth as something that resides in the world. [ . . . ] But Wikipedia suggests a different theory of truth. Just think about the way we learn what words mean. Generally speaking, we do so by listening to other people (our parents, first). Since we want to communicate with them (after all, they feed us), we use the words in the same way they do. Wikipedia says judgments of truth and falsehood work the same way. The community decides that two plus two equals four the same way it decides what an apple is: by consensus. Yes, that means that if the community changes its minds and decides that two plus two equals five, then two plus two does equal five. The community isn’t likely to do such an absurd or useless thing, but it has the ability.<sup>99</sup>

Even though the description by Marshall Poe is rather overstated, he adequately presents the important role of the Wikipedia community in the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia. The policy of “verifiability” shows that Wikipedia does not care about what is “true” according to editors’ views or their research but what is “verifiable”.<sup>100</sup> Wikipedia has created a separate page about this topic, named “Verifiability, not truth,” in which it argues that “verifiability” is the minimum requirement for Wikipedia to accept material.<sup>101</sup> It is interesting that the concept of “verifiability” has also been associated with historical scholarship since the modern era. Historians have used the “verifiability” of sources as “evidence to support historical claims about what happened in the past”.<sup>102</sup> In the nineteenth century, historians managed to separate themselves from novelists, poets, artists, and philosophers.<sup>103</sup> Of course, historians do not only aim to find “verifiable sources” but also to “tell a good story,” in other words to produce an accurate historical narrative.<sup>104</sup>

The third content policy is “no original research,” which makes clear that Wikipedia articles should not be the results of original research, in the way that aca-

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97 Valatsou, *Ανάδυση νέων μνημονικών τόπων στο διαδίκτυο*, 105.

98 *Ibid.*

99 Poe, “The Hive,” cited in Valatsou, *Ανάδυση νέων μνημονικών τόπων στο διαδίκτυο*, 105–6.

100 “Wikipedia:Verifiability, not truth,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability,\\_not\\_truth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability,_not_truth)

101 *Ibid.*

102 Kramer and Maza, “Introduction: The Cultural History of Historical Thought,” 8.

103 *Ibid.*

104 *Ibid.*

demical articles are, but they should be based on secondary published sources.<sup>105</sup> According to this policy, Wikipedia articles should be based on reliable – published – sources, namely, secondary sources, which are known and widely accepted.<sup>106</sup> This kind of research is completely antithetical to academic historical research, which is based on primary sources and tends to place value on original research.<sup>107</sup> It is consistent, though, with traditional encyclopedias and other tertiary sources.

To clarify its content policies, Wikipedia explains what sources are considered “reliable, published sources”.<sup>108</sup> According to Wikipedia, the definition of reliability is complex and depends on three factors: the work itself, the author of the work, and the publisher of the work.<sup>109</sup> The reliability of a source also depends on the broader context in which this source will be used, and the age of the source(s), especially for scientific and academic topics because older sources can be regarded as outdated and inaccurate.<sup>110</sup> However, Wikipedia warns editors to be careful when they use very new sources and to ensure they are able to discern the historical differences between the present and the past and not to make anachronistic arguments.<sup>111</sup> This is particularly interesting in relation to historical topics because, as Wikipedia itself states, editors should be aware of the problem of “recentism” and provide a broader, long-term historical view.<sup>112</sup>

In addition, Wikipedia cites a catalogue of the sources that it considers as reliable materials in each subject area.<sup>113</sup> It suggests different sources for mathematics, physics, arts, sports, geography, and history. For the users interested in creating articles about history, Wikipedia urges users to use mainly published scholarly sources from academic presses. These sources include both books and journal articles, some of which might be available online and to which the users can have easy access.<sup>114</sup> They can also use specialized encyclopedias on historical

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105 “Wikipedia: Core content policies”.

106 Ibid. For more information, see “Wikipedia:No original research,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No\\_original\\_research](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research)

107 Salor, *Sum of all Knowledge*, 101.

108 “Wikipedia:Reliable sources,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable\\_sources](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable_sources)

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 “Wikipedia:Recentism,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Recentism>

113 “Wikipedia:Reliable source examples,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable\\_source\\_examples#History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable_source_examples#History)

114 Ibid.

topics, which are edited by experts.<sup>115</sup> However, Wikipedia warns that users should use “memoirs and oral histories that specialists consult with caution, for they are filled with stories that people wish to remember – and usually recall without going back to the original documentation”.<sup>116</sup> This is an interesting point, as it shows that Wikipedia adapts its guidelines and policies to the specific subject that it aims to cover. It does not regard the same types of sources as reliable for all its subjects. Additionally, the use of oral material for articles about history reveals Wikipedia’s broader desire to include content related to marginal communities and individuals who might not otherwise be covered by printed materials. Wikipedia seems to value people’s memories, at least when it comes to its guidelines and on the subject of history, even though several studies have pointed out the absence of oral histories within Wikipedia’s contents.<sup>117</sup>

On the other hand, Wikipedia supports the idea that its users should not get information about history from novels, films, TV shows, or tour guides at various sites, as “they are full of rumor and gossip and false or exaggerated tales and tend to present rosy-colored histories in which the well-known names are portrayed heroically”.<sup>118</sup> Popular forms of history are not regarded as accurate historical knowledge by Wikipedia. Therefore, even though Wikipedia is a digital encyclopedia, its reliability and more specifically the reliability of the historical articles on Wikipedia is mainly based on printed academic sources that may be (or may not be) available online. Even though Wikipedia is characterized by its public and digital nature, it prioritizes printed and academic sources. In this way, history on Wikipedia is effectively crowdsourced by its editors’ abilities to synthesize established academic knowledge.

Apart from the main content policies of Wikipedia, there are also broader principles that guide user engagement with Wikipedia. On his profile page, Jimmy Wales has listed the main principles of Wikipedia. The Wikipedia community created the “Statement of Principles” in October 2001.<sup>119</sup> Wikipedia has updated these principles since then but there are only minor differences between the 2001 version

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115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

117 About the absence of oral histories on Wikipedia, see Matthew A. Vetter, “Possible Enlightenment: Wikipedia’s Encyclopedic Promise and Epistemological Failure,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Jake Orlowitz, “How Wikipedia Drove Professors Crazy, Made Me Sane, and Almost Saved the Internet,” in *Wikipedia @20*.

118 “Wikipedia:Reliable source examples”.

119 For the 2001 version of the statement of principles, see “User:Jimbo Wales/Statement of principles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?oldid=409315229>

and the current one.<sup>120</sup> Specifically, Wales refers to Wikipedia's openness by arguing that "Wikipedia's success to date is entirely a function of our open community," namely that anyone can take part in the Wikipedia community and contribute to its contents.<sup>121</sup> He adds that Wikipedia will continue to exist and grow if the users respect the NPOV policy and promote a "culture of thoughtful, diplomatic honesty".<sup>122</sup> He encourages new users to take part and write, and makes clear that there should be no organization, elitism, or any hierarchy within Wikipedia, which prevents new users from participating in the community.<sup>123</sup> This does not necessarily mean that Wikipedia should be free from vandalism or other forms of misbehavior.<sup>124</sup> Instead, it means that more experienced editors should not impose obstacles for new users and, instead, create a friendly environment for them. Wales also writes that any user should feel free to intervene in the editing of Wikipedia articles and check the edits that have already taken place. He also reiterates that the collaborative spirit of Wikipedia is to have good quality content. As he mentions, "any changes to the software must be gradual and reversible," which means that any editing on Wikipedia should be the result of "community consensus".<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, users should respect the non-licensed form of Wikipedia's contents and their open character. Users should understand that "Wikipedia is an encyclopedia," so it should cover more and more topics.<sup>126</sup> Thus, editors should work on more and more subject areas and keep the existing ones constantly updated. Users, who are dissatisfied and have complaints, should share their problems with other users but in a "constructive way".<sup>127</sup> They should engage in discussions about the related topics to develop and improve the coverage of the topic. The last principle refers to the way users should behave within the Wikipedia community. As Wales writes, users should behave with "honesty and politeness," and should not "misrepresent" other users' arguments.<sup>128</sup> In this way, Wikipedia editors can reach a "community consensus," do not commit vandalism, and continue to improve Wikipedia's contents.

Wikipedia has established several other principles that supplement each other. One of them is the "trifecta," as Wikipedia calls it, that is the three main

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120 "User:Jimbo Wales/Statement of principles," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 11, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Jimbo\\_Wales/Statement\\_of\\_principles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Jimbo_Wales/Statement_of_principles)

121 *Ibid.*

122 *Ibid.*

123 *Ibid.*

124 *Ibid.*

125 *Ibid.*

126 *Ibid.*

127 *Ibid.*

128 *Ibid.*

guiding principles of the encyclopedia.<sup>129</sup> In 2005, Wikipedia established the principles of the “trifecta” to determine users’ engagement with Wikipedia’s contents.<sup>130</sup> The “trifecta” warns editors to “remain neutral,” “don’t be a jerk,” and to “ignore all rules” (IAR).<sup>131</sup> The first principle refers to the policy of neutrality that is analyzed above. The second principle shows the polite and respectful way Wikipedia editors should behave within the Wikipedia community, while they create and edit articles. The third principle is the most crucial here, as it reveals how Wikipedia perceives editors’ agency. It introduces the logic of “ignore all rules,” which means that users should prioritize the editing and improvement of Wikipedia, even if it goes against Wikipedia’s own rules. The principle of IAR was one of the first Wikipedia policies and aimed to encourage users to participate in the Wikipedia community.<sup>132</sup> Specifically, Larry Sanger, the co-founder of Wikipedia, proposed the policy of IAR as he wanted to make clear that the rules of Wikipedia should not prevent users from taking part in the editing of Wikipedia articles.<sup>133</sup> According to Wikipedia, the original formulation of the IAR policy was: “If rules make you nervous and depressed, and not desirous of participation in the Wiki, then ignore them and go about your business”.<sup>134</sup> Wikipedia cites the following example to explain what this policy means in practice (Figure 2).

IAR is significant in terms of how users should contribute to the production of knowledge on Wikipedia. It activates users’ agency and subjectivities and does not oblige them to follow all the established rules and policies. Instead, Wikipedia encourages users to improve the encyclopedia, even if they do not follow all rules.<sup>135</sup>

Since 2005, the Wikipedia community has updated the “trifecta” to a more contemporary version based around the concept of the “five pillars,” which summarize the fundamental principles of Wikipedia. According to those principles, Wikipedia constitutes an encyclopedia which means that it “is not a soapbox, an advertising platform, a vanity press, an experiment in anarchy or democracy, an indiscriminate collection of information, nor a web directory. It is not a dictio-

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129 “Wikipedia:Trifecta,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Trifecta>

130 “Wikipedia:Trifecta: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Trifecta&action=history&dir=prev>

131 “Wikipedia:Trifecta”.

132 Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*, 112.

133 Ibid.

134 “Ignore all rules,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 17, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ignore\\_all\\_rules#:~:text=Meaning,-A%20flowchart%20relating&text=%22Ignore%20all%20rules%22%20refers%20to,it%20augments%20Wikipedia's%20bureaucratic%20structure.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ignore_all_rules#:~:text=Meaning,-A%20flowchart%20relating&text=%22Ignore%20all%20rules%22%20refers%20to,it%20augments%20Wikipedia's%20bureaucratic%20structure.)

135 See “Wikipedia:Here to build an encyclopedia,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 17, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Here\\_to\\_build\\_an\\_encyclopedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Here_to_build_an_encyclopedia)

*Suppose you have an idea...*

- Are you sure that your idea is a good one by common sense and that it improves the encyclopedia?
  - *No*: **DON'T DO IT**
  - *Yes*:
    - Does it break the rules?
      - *No*: **DO IT**
      - *Yes*:
        - Is that because the rules are wrong?
          - *No*: Ignore the rules and **DO IT**
          - *Yes*: Change the rules and **DO IT**

**Figure 2:** Screenshot of “What ‘Ignore all rules’ means,” accessed November 17, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:What\\_%22Ignore\\_all\\_rules%22\\_means&oldid=851388560](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:What_%22Ignore_all_rules%22_means&oldid=851388560).

nary, a newspaper, or a collection of source documents, although some of its Wikimedia projects are”.<sup>136</sup> Secondly, “Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view”.<sup>137</sup> In other words, Wikipedia consists of articles that “document and explain major points of view, giving due weight with respect to their performance in an impartial zone”.<sup>138</sup> This can be achieved if “articles strive for verifiable accuracy, citing reliable, authoritative sources, especially when the project is controversial or is on living persons”.<sup>139</sup> Furthermore, “editors’ personal experiences, interpretations or opinions do not belong” to Wikipedia.<sup>140</sup> Moreover, Wikipedia contents are free and “anyone can use, edit and distribute”. This means that “no editor owns an article and any contributions can and will be mercilessly edited and redistributed”.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, they have to “respect copyright laws, and never plagiarize from sources”.<sup>142</sup> They should also behave with “respect and civility”.<sup>143</sup> The last principle is that “Wikipedia has no firm rules,” which means that “Wikipedia has policies and guidelines, but they are not carved in stone”.<sup>144</sup>

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136 “Wikipedia:Five Pillars,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 20, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five\\_pillars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars)

137 *Ibid.*

138 *Ibid.*

139 *Ibid.*

140 *Ibid.*

141 *Ibid.*

142 *Ibid.*

143 *Ibid.*

144 *Ibid.*

Consequently, “their content and interpretation can evolve over time”.<sup>145</sup> The last pillar is the most important, as it consolidates users’ active role within Wikipedia. The pillar of “no firm rules” is strongly connected to the policy of “ignore all rules” that I analyzed above. Both policies encourage users to care more about the broader spirit of editing and improving the online encyclopedia, and do not just focus on all the rules. The users should understand the broader logic of Wikipedia and how it works, not just try to follow all its rules. They should focus on the principles and not on the guidelines. As Wikipedia mentions, the policies can change over time, so users should prioritize editing.

In this way, Wikipedia promotes the engagement of users with Wikipedia, even if the users do not follow all rules and guidelines. As Wikipedia clarifies, “the rules are principles, not laws”.<sup>146</sup> In other words, “policies and guidelines exist only as rough approximations of their underlying principles”.<sup>147</sup> The rules are just signs of broader principles that Wikipedia editors should consider while they edit Wikipedia pages. Wikipedia editors should interpret the policies of Wikipedia according to the broader framework to which they aim to contribute. Therefore, policies and guidelines “must be understood in context, using some sense and discretion”.<sup>148</sup> The words “some sense” and “discretion” include hyperlinks that further explain what these terms mean. Both terms make clear that editors should not follow every single rule but “use common sense” and, in some cases, they should even ignore rules to improve Wikipedia.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, editors should find a balance between the principles and the improvement of Wikipedia.<sup>150</sup> They should be able to understand the broader context of any principle and make the appropriate contributions.<sup>151</sup> Each instance of editing has its own context, so it should be understood separately.<sup>152</sup>

Also, every contribution should be the result of a broader community consensus.<sup>153</sup> Thus, Wikipedia enables users’ agency and prioritizes constructive editing.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> “Wikipedia:The rules are principles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 16, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:The\\_rules\\_are\\_principles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:The_rules_are_principles)

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid; “Wikipedia:Ignore all rules,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 16, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Ignore\\_all\\_rules](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Ignore_all_rules)

<sup>150</sup> “Wikipedia:The rules are principles”.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.



As Jimmy Wales clarifies: “Wikipedia is first and foremost an effort to create and distribute a free encyclopedia of the highest possible quality to every single person on the planet in their own language. Asking whether the community comes before or after this goal is really asking the wrong question: the entire purpose of the community is precisely this goal”.<sup>154</sup>

To enable the agency of the community in the editing of articles and to give users space to discuss the process of editing, Wikipedia provides the “talk pages,” a feature that is available on every article. This gives editors the opportunity to actively engage with any of Wikipedia’s contents, discuss issues of editing, style, prose, and organization, and pose broader questions related to the topic they have chosen to edit. More specifically, every Wikipedia article includes its own “talk page,” which provides space for editors to further discuss the topic of the article.<sup>155</sup> Wikipedia points out that users should use the “talk pages” to “communicate, stay on topic, be positive, stay objective, deal with facts, share materials, discuss edits, make proposals”.<sup>156</sup> As Wikipedia clarifies, “talk pages” should not be used as spaces for the expression of personal opinions on a topic.<sup>157</sup> However, as I will show in the next chapters, editors do use that space for personal reflection, even if that reflection is often geared towards the improvement of the relevant article. These “talk pages” can be very long, so they are typically archived when they exceed seventy-five kilobytes.<sup>158</sup> Thus, the reader can find older discussions by searching within the archive of any given “talk page”. The “talk pages” constitute one of the most significant features of Wikipedia’s public character and reveal the process of how an article has been formed, which debates took place between the editors involved, what differences they may have had, which issues might have appeared, and how these were resolved.

Apart from its main policies and guidelines, Wikipedia has also established a set of rules that not only determine how Wikipedia editors should create and edit Wikipedia articles, but also how they should interact with other editors. According to these rules, Wikipedia editors should “be civil,” they should not “make negative remarks about other editors as people,” even if they disagree with them in

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154 Ibid.

155 “Wikipedia:Talk page guidelines,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Talk\\_page\\_guidelines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Talk_page_guidelines)

156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.

158 “Help:Archiving a talk page,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Archiving\\_a\\_talk\\_page](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Archiving_a_talk_page)

their discussions.<sup>159</sup> The editors should “assume good faith,” which means that they should consider other editors as rational beings that aim to improve Wikipedia.<sup>160</sup> Also, Wikipedia editors should “discuss contentious changes on a talk page,” so when they edit other user’s contributions, they should mention the reasons for their changes.<sup>161</sup> As Wikipedia clarifies, editors should “undo others’ edits with care”.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, editors should understand why their “article or edit was deleted”.<sup>163</sup> There are several reasons why editors can delete an article. For example, if the article does not follow the guidelines of Wikipedia or it is not based on reliable sources.<sup>164</sup> Lastly, editors should use the talk pages of Wikipedia articles to “resolve disputes”.<sup>165</sup> They should express their disagreements, but they should not be aggressive.<sup>166</sup>

On the same page, Wikipedia also defines how editors should collaborate to create and edit articles. Editors should provide summaries of their contributions to explain what they want to change and why.<sup>167</sup> If more clarifications are necessary, they should make discussion posts on the talk page.<sup>168</sup> Their discussion posts should be signed with their username and a timestamp.<sup>169</sup> Editors should also preview the changes they have made in order to be on track with how they have changed the article.<sup>170</sup> If the editors are not sure about some issues, such as neutrality or reliability of sources, they can use noticeboards to ask for help from the administrators.<sup>171</sup> In that way, editors can get feedback about their contributions. Wikipedia encourages editors to join in with the Wikipedia community because, in doing so, they would be able to see the community discussions, the tasks, and the projects that should be covered.<sup>172</sup> Lastly, editors should ask for help if they are not sure about any potential issues. They can do that in several ways, such as posting on talk pages, using the help desk, the help chat, or visiting Wikipedia

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159 “Wikipedia:Simplified ruleset,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Simplified\\_ruleset](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Simplified_ruleset)

160 *Ibid.*

161 *Ibid.*

162 *Ibid.*

163 *Ibid.*

164 *Ibid.*

165 *Ibid.*

166 *Ibid.*

167 *Ibid.*

168 *Ibid.*

169 *Ibid.*

170 *Ibid.*

171 *Ibid.*

172 *Ibid.*

pages that offer guidance and assistance to editors.<sup>173</sup> The overall aim of all these guidelines is to make editors improve Wikipedia's contents by following the broader established principles that I analyzed above, and by reaching a community consensus.

Regarding how users can reach a consensus, Wikipedia suggests a specific method of engagement with its contents.<sup>174</sup> Apart from diplomacy, good faith, and respectful behavior, editors should follow the logic of the "BOLD, revert, discuss cycle (BRD)".<sup>175</sup> "BOLD" editing means that even if editors are not sure about their contributions to Wikipedia and have not yet received any feedback from other editors, they should still make the edit on Wikipedia.<sup>176</sup> Editors should "revert" an edit if they think that the edit does not improve Wikipedia. However, BRD does not encourage reverting.<sup>177</sup> Editors should also "discuss" a contribution and explain the reason why they made that specific contribution.<sup>178</sup> The last approach is "cycle," which means that if an editor has realized other editors' concerns about his contribution, they can make a new edit.<sup>179</sup> All those steps can lead to a quick community consensus and produce knowledge that is of good quality.

In case the editors do not reach a community consensus, Wikipedia has established a set of rules, the "three revert-rule" (3RR), which helps to resolve this situation.<sup>180</sup> This rule is applied when an editor is involved in a dispute between editors, in an "edit war," as Wikipedia calls it. "Edit warring" is when an editor "repeatedly restores their preferred version".<sup>181</sup> Editors engaged with "edit warring" can be blocked or even banned from Wikipedia community.<sup>182</sup> The 3RR rule claims that an editor cannot make more than three reverts, either on the same or different material, on a single page within a 24-hour period.<sup>183</sup> In other words, performing a fourth revert within one day signifies "edit warring".<sup>184</sup> Wikipedia

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173 Ibid.

174 On consensus, see "Wikipedia:Consensus," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Consensus>

175 "Wikipedia:BOLD, revert, discuss cycle," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 17, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:BOLD,\\_revert,\\_discuss\\_cycle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:BOLD,_revert,_discuss_cycle)

176 Ibid.

177 Ibid.

178 Ibid.

179 Ibid.

180 "Wikipedia:Edit warring," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 18, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Edit\\_warring](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Edit_warring)

181 Ibid.

182 Ibid.

183 Ibid.

184 Ibid.

points out that there are exemptions from that rule, such as reverting their own actions, vandalism or clear violations of policies.<sup>185</sup> In that way, Wikipedia tries to prevent disputes between editors and promote only constructive debates and discussions that aim to improve and further develop Wikipedia's contents.

Overall, as shown above, the rules that Wikipedia has established in the last twenty years of its operation can be categorized into policies, guidelines, rules on content, and rules on conduct.<sup>186</sup> Policies represent Wikipedia's broader principles, and guidelines signify the application of these policies. The rules on content explain how Wikipedia articles should be written and the rules on conduct refer to how editors should behave within the Wikipedia community and interact with other Wikipedia editors. Even though Wikipedia has established a solid community of users, whose actions are determined by rules, it gives space and freedom to users to become active participants and work on the production of knowledge. As Wales has pointed out, all Wikipedia's rules and methods are open-ended; as they are just on wiki pages, there is no mechanism of enforcement.<sup>187</sup> The main purpose of Wikipedia is not to force its users to follow all guidelines and policies but to create pages, edit them constantly, and thus, improve the online encyclopedia. The policies exist to create a self-regulated community and not restrict users' activities. As Wikipedia puts it, policies do not "police content quality," rather they "provide the framework and a safe environment for an anarchic wiki community to function".<sup>188</sup>

## Hierarchy and engagement within the Wikipedia community

Wikipedia has been celebrated as a digital platform on which "anyone can edit any page at any time".<sup>189</sup> However, not all users have the same power to determine how they will edit a page, what they will delete, revert, or change. There is an important hierarchy within the Wikipedia community, which categorizes users and assigns them specific roles.<sup>190</sup> At the same time, this notion of hierarchy not only

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**185** Ibid.

**186** "Help:Introduction to policies and guidelines/4," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 18, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Introduction\\_to\\_policies\\_and\\_guidelines/4](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Introduction_to_policies_and_guidelines/4)

**187** Wales, "The Birth of Wikipedia".

**188** "Wikipedia:The role of policies in collaborative anarchy," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:The\\_role\\_of\\_policies\\_in\\_collaborative\\_anarchy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:The_role_of_policies_in_collaborative_anarchy)

**189** Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*, 14.

**190** The issue of hierarchy is complicated, and some scholars have highlighted the existence of hierarchy within the Wikipedia community: see, for example, Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*; Koerner, "Wikipedia Has a Bias Problem". Other scholars have celebrated the lack of

refers to the users themselves but also to Wikipedia articles. There are articles that Wikipedia classifies as vital or featured and are discerned from other articles because of their contents' quality and good coverage of a topic in sufficient detail.

Wikipedia includes a page that explains how its administration works.<sup>191</sup> As I mentioned above, Wikipedia belongs to the Wikimedia Foundation (WMF) and is one of several wiki-based projects that WMF operates.<sup>192</sup> The WMF is governed by a board of trustees, which is not involved in the creation or application of policies on Wikipedia.<sup>193</sup> Wikipedia constitutes a self-regulated community with its own members and structures. Wikipedia users, who contribute to its contents, can be categorized into editors, stewards, the arbitration committee, bureaucrats, and administrators (Figure 3).<sup>194</sup>

<b>Human administration</b>
Wikimedia Board of Trustees
<b>Wikipedians</b>
Wikimedia staff
Stewards
Arbitration Committee
Bureaucrats
Administrators

**Figure 3:** Screenshot of Wikipedia administration, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians>.

Editors are also called Wikipedians and are volunteers who write and edit Wikipedia pages.<sup>195</sup> Some of them can be registered users and include personal information on their profiles, and others can be unregistered.<sup>196</sup> In contrast to readers, editors actively engage with Wikipedia's contents. Even though all editors are theoretically equal, some editors have some "extra privileges," which are determined

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hierarchy within Wikipedia: see Yochai Benkler, "From Utopia to Practice and Back," in *Wikipedia @20*.

<sup>191</sup> "Wikipedia:Administration," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administration>

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid. See "Board of Trustees," *Wikimedia Foundation*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://wikimediafoundation.org/role/board/>

<sup>194</sup> "Wikipedia:Administration".

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. For more details, see "Wikipedia:Wikipedians," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians>

<sup>196</sup> "Wikipedia:Administration".

by the age of the account and the number of edits.<sup>197</sup> Wikipedia provides those privileges automatically or upon request.<sup>198</sup> For example, a user becomes an “auto-confirmed” user when their account is older than four days. On the other hand, an editor has the right to revert changes, remove a page, edit a template, and also to check users’ IPs – though only after sending a request to an administrator, bureaucrat, or the arbitration committee.<sup>199</sup> As Wikipedia states, the English Wikipedia has 40,310,425 registered users and only 129,681 of them contribute frequently.<sup>200</sup> There is also an unknown number of unregistered users, though Wikipedia does encourage users to register.<sup>201</sup> Registered users have some benefits, they can create pages, not only edit but also upload media, and can do so without making their IPs visible to the public.<sup>202</sup>

Stewards are volunteer editors who have full access to the wiki interface on all Wikimedia wikis.<sup>203</sup> Stewards can change the permissions that are provided to different user groups.<sup>204</sup> They have “check user rights” and “oversight rights,” which means that they can check users’ IPs and can delete information from any page, edit, or entry.<sup>205</sup> Their tasks include “technical implementation of community consensus, dealing with emergencies, and intervening against cross-wiki vandalism”.<sup>206</sup> Stewards are elected by the global Wikimedia community annually.<sup>207</sup> In addition to stewards, there is the arbitration committee (ArbCom or Arbcs), who are volun-

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**197** Ibid.

**198** Ibid.

**199** Ibid. For some of the editors’ rights, see “Wikipedia:Rollback,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Rollback>; “Wikipedia:Page mover,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Page\\_mover](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Page_mover); “Wikipedia:Template editor,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Template\\_editor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Template_editor)

**200** “Wikipedia:Administration”.

**201** Ibid.

**202** Ibid.

**203** Ibid. For more details, see “Stewards,” *Wikimedia Meta-Wiki*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Stewards>

**204** “Wikipedia:Administration”. About these permissions, see “Manual:User rights,” *MediaWiki*, accessed November 19, 2020, [https://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/Manual:User\\_rights](https://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/Manual:User_rights)

**205** “Wikipedia:Administration”. For more details, see “Wikipedia:CheckUser,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:CheckUser>; “Wikipedia:Oversight,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Oversight>

**206** “Wikipedia:Administration”.

**207** See “Stewards/Election,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Stewards/Elections>

teer editors assigned to find solutions to unresolved “conduct disputes”.<sup>208</sup> Arbitrators can impose sanctions to resolve conduct disputes. They are elected annually, and the first committee was appointed by Jimmy Wales in 2003.<sup>209</sup>

The fourth category of Wikipedia editors is the bureaucrats, who are also volunteer editors.<sup>210</sup> Bureaucrats have the abilities to “promote other users to administrator or bureaucrat status,” “remove the admin status of other users,” or “grant and revoke an account’s bot status”.<sup>211</sup> However, in contrast to stewards, bureaucrats do not have “oversight” and “check user rights”.<sup>212</sup> As Wikipedia states the total number of bureaucrats on the English Wikipedia is nineteen.<sup>213</sup> Administrators (admins or sysops) are editors who have access to specific technical functions, such as protecting and deleting pages, and blocking other editors.<sup>214</sup> Admins are not elected but appointed after a review process by bureaucrats.<sup>215</sup> The current English version of Wikipedia has 1,123 administrators.<sup>216</sup> Admins should use their privileges in disputes with other editors. The privileges of admins can be removed only by Jimmy Wales and the arbitration committee, and the removal should be authorized by bureaucrats or stewards.<sup>217</sup>

In the last years, because of the claims that Wikipedia’s contents are biased and that there is an important gender gap within the Wikipedia community, Wikipedia has added two more categories of editors: Wikipedians in residence, and educators and students of the Wikipedia education program.<sup>218</sup> Wikipedians in residence are volunteer editors who have been placed into educational or cultural institutions by

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208 “Wikipedia:Administration”. For more details on the arbitration committee, see “Wikipedia: Arbitration Committee,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Arbitration\\_Committee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Arbitration_Committee)

209 “Wikipedia:Administration”.

210 *Ibid.* For more details on bureaucrats, see “Wikipedia:Bureaucrats,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Bureaucrats>

211 “Wikipedia:Administration”.

212 *Ibid.*

213 *Ibid.*

214 *Ibid.* For more details on administrators, see “Wikipedia:Administrators,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Administrators>

215 “Wikipedia:Administration”.

216 *Ibid.*

217 *Ibid.*

218 Regarding the contents bias and gender gap within Wikipedia community, see Ford and Wajcman, “‘Anyone can edit’, not everyone does: Wikipedia’s infrastructure and the gender gap,” 511–27; Koerner, “Wikipedia Has a Bias Problem”; Evans, et al., “What We Talk About When We Talk About Community”; Massa and Zelenkauskaitė, “Gender Gap in Wikipedia Editing: A Cross-Language Comparison,” 85–96; Bourdeloie and Vicente, “Contributing to Wikipedia: A Question of Gender,” 147–60.

Wikipedia, such as art galleries, archives, libraries, museums, or universities, and try to improve Wikipedia's coverage of related topics.<sup>219</sup> Those editors should use the resources and material offered by their involved institution and work on the improvement of related Wikipedia pages.<sup>220</sup> They should also communicate their work to the public and organize workshops and training for other editors.<sup>221</sup> Some of the institutions that have hosted Wikipedians in residence are the National Library of Wales, the British Museum, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the British Library, the Smithsonian Institution, the Royal Society of Chemistry, UC Berkeley, Columbia University, the University of Toronto, the National Library of Norway, the Federal Archives of Switzerland, and smaller venues like the Derby Museum and Art Gallery and The New Art Gallery Walsall, and many others.<sup>222</sup>

The last category of editors relates to educators and students, who are part of the Education Program.<sup>223</sup> Since its foundation, educational institutions, schools, colleges, and universities, perceived Wikipedia as a threat to education.<sup>224</sup> In 2010, as a response to all those claims, Wikipedia established the Education Program, which aimed to bring educators and students closer to Wikipedia.<sup>225</sup> At the same time, several teachers and university professors started to use Wikipedia in course assignments to make students more familiar with the encyclopedia, help understand the process of knowledge production, and how editing on Wikipedia works.<sup>226</sup> Therefore, the Education Program constituted an institutional effort by Wikipedia to connect Wikipedia to education and change its perception as a

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219 "Wikipedia:Administration".

220 Ibid. For more information on Wikipedians in residence, see "Wikipedian in residence," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedian\\_in\\_residence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedian_in_residence) For the broader collaboration between Wikipedia and institutions, see "Wikipedia:GLAM," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM>

221 "Wikipedia:Administration".

222 "Wikipedian in residence". For a list of the collaboration projects, see "Wikipedia:GLAM/Projects," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM/Projects>

223 "Wikipedia:Administration".

224 On Wikipedia as a threat to education, see Chandler and Gregory, "Sleeping with the Enemy: Wikipedia in the College Classroom".

225 "Wikipedia Education Program," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia\\_Education\\_Program](https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia_Education_Program)

226 On the use of Wikipedia in education, see Robert E. Cummings and Matt Barton, *Wiki Writing: Collaborative Learning in the College Classroom* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Robert E. Cummings, "The First Twenty Years of Teaching with Wikipedia: From Faculty Enemy to Faculty Enabler," in *Wikipedia @20*; Benjamin Mako Hill and Aaron Shaw, "The



threat or enemy to students and educators.<sup>227</sup> The members of that program are assigned to fulfill course-related assignments and, in that way, to improve Wikipedia's topics and promote gender diversity.<sup>228</sup>

All those hierarchical categories refer to the registered Wikipedia editors and do not include the unregistered users, who are also able to edit Wikipedia pages. The unregistered users are users who have not logged in and are named by their IP addresses and not with their usernames.<sup>229</sup> Those users can edit all pages except for the "protected" pages; they can create "talk pages," but they cannot upload media, such as files and images.<sup>230</sup> It is interesting that Wikipedia has created a page with the name "IPs are human too," which clarifies that unregistered users should not be discouraged from participating in Wikipedia nor be perceived as inferior users.<sup>231</sup> Wikipedia points out that most edits by unregistered users do not lead to vandalism. To deal with common misconceptions about unregistered users, Wikipedia argues that unregistered users have the same rights as registered users.<sup>232</sup>

Apart from the users' hierarchy within the Wikipedia community, Wikipedia has created a hierarchical system for the assessment of its articles, which motivates users to make more and better contributions. Wikipedia has established a system of content assessment, which evaluates how good the quality of an article is.<sup>233</sup> That system is not only based on the quality but also on the language and the layout of the article.<sup>234</sup> Wikipedia divides its articles into different categories by using a grading scheme (Figure 4). The most complete articles are those that have been marked with the "A-class". Below that grade category, there are the following categories: "Good articles/GA," articles marked as "B-class," "C-class," "Start-class," "Stub-class," and "List-class". "Lists" and "Stubs" are the most incom-

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Most Important Laboratory for Social Scientific and Computing Research in History," in *Wikipedia @20*.

227 "Wikipedia Education Program".

228 *Ibid.*

229 "Wikipedia:User access levels," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:User\\_access\\_levels#Unregistered\\_\(IP\\_or\\_not\\_logged\\_in\)\\_users](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:User_access_levels#Unregistered_(IP_or_not_logged_in)_users).

230 *Ibid.* On these "protected" pages, see "Wikipedia:Protection policy," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Protection\\_policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Protection_policy)

231 "Wikipedia:IPs are human too," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:IPs\\_are\\_human\\_too](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:IPs_are_human_too)

232 *Ibid.*

233 "Wikipedia:Content assessment," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Content\\_assessment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Content_assessment)

234 *Ibid.*

Quality
★ FA
★ FL
ⓘ A
⊕ GA
B
C
Start
Stub
List

**Figure 4:** Screenshot of grade categories, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Content\\_assessment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Content_assessment).

plete articles, which need further editing.<sup>235</sup> Articles that have reached “A-class” can be improved even more and become “Featured articles/FA,” and more developed lists can become “Featured lists/FL”.<sup>236</sup>

The articles that belong to the “List-class,” do not offer adequate coverage of a topic, they just contain links to other related articles.<sup>237</sup> This is the category with the most incomplete articles that need the attention of editors. Articles that are a little bit better than “Lists” articles but just include a brief description of the topic are the “Stub-class” articles. They are short articles that need a lot of editing to become meaningful articles.<sup>238</sup> As Wikipedia states, they can be well-written, but they can also have important content issues.<sup>239</sup> They do not offer an extensive narrative but a brief definition of the topic. In a better position, there are articles marked as “Start-class,” which are more developed than the “List-class” articles, but they are still incomplete.<sup>240</sup> Usually, their sources are not reliable, or their

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid. Wikipedia has a specific page which includes all Wikipedia “List-class” articles. See “Category:List-Class articles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:List-Class\\_articles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:List-Class_articles)

<sup>238</sup> “Wikipedia:Content assessment”. For the list of “Stub-class” articles, see “Category:Stub-Class articles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Stub-Class\\_articles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Stub-Class_articles)

<sup>239</sup> “Wikipedia:Content assessment”.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. For the list of “Start-class” articles, see “Category:Start-Class articles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Start-Class\\_articles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Start-Class_articles)

prose is not encyclopedic.<sup>241</sup> Those articles need improvement in content and organization.<sup>242</sup>

The articles become more important when they reach a “C-class” grade. Those articles offer significant coverage of the related subject but still miss content or materials.<sup>243</sup> These articles need more editing to improve their clarity, balance, or prose, or to face problems, such as content bias, or original research.<sup>244</sup> “B-class” articles are almost complete, they do not have serious problems, but they need a little bit more editing to become “good articles”.<sup>245</sup> Those articles should deal with few problems in terms of content and structure.<sup>246</sup> “Good articles” are characterized by Wikipedia as “well written, verifiable, with no original research, broad in coverage, neutral, stable, and illustrated”.<sup>247</sup> These articles just need some help from subject and style experts to become even more professional.<sup>248</sup> The most complete articles are in the “A-class” category. They are well-written, well-organized, and well-illustrated articles with clear structure and no copyright problems.<sup>249</sup> The only issues are a few style problems, which should be ironed out to allow articles to become “featured article” candidates.<sup>250</sup> The next category is the “featured list” articles, which contains articles with extensive and good quality lists of items. They are characterized by good prose, engaging lead, comprehensiveness, structure, style, and stability.<sup>251</sup> The last category includes the “featured articles,” which fulfill all the professional standards required by Wikipedia.<sup>252</sup> They are “well-written, comprehensive, well-researched, neutral, sta-

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241 “Wikipedia:Content assessment”.

242 Ibid. For the list of “C-class” articles, see “Category:C-Class articles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:C-Class\\_articles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:C-Class_articles)

243 “Wikipedia:Content assessment”.

244 Ibid.

245 Ibid. For the list of “B-class” articles, see “Category:B-Class articles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:B-Class\\_articles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:B-Class_articles)

246 “Wikipedia:Content assessment”.

247 Ibid. For the list of “Good articles,” see “Category:GA-Class articles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:GA-Class\\_articles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:GA-Class_articles)

248 “Wikipedia:Content assessment”.

249 Ibid. For the list of “A-Class articles,” see “Category:A-Class articles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:A-Class\\_articles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:A-Class_articles)

250 “Wikipedia:Content assessment”.

251 Ibid. For the list of “FL-Class articles,” see “Category:FL-Class articles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:FL-Class\\_articles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:FL-Class_articles)

252 “Wikipedia:Content assessment”.

ble” articles with a “lead section, appropriate structure, consistent citations,” they also contain media, such as images and videos, and are of an adequate length.<sup>253</sup>

The question is how the assessment of Wikipedia contents takes place and who is responsible for that process. The evaluation of content quality is a task that the members of WikiProjects have taken over, such as those involved with WikiProject History, WikiProject Chemistry, or WikiProject Technology. The members of those projects are responsible for checking and evaluating the related articles by tagging their talk pages.<sup>254</sup> A bot then collects all the tags and determines the average rating of the article.<sup>255</sup> If several WikiProjects are involved in an article, the bot keeps the best rating.<sup>256</sup> However, for the assessment of a “Good article” or a “Featured article,” independent editors are responsible and not WikiProjects.<sup>257</sup> More specifically, there is a single editor who reviews potential “Good articles,” while a panel is responsible for reviewing potential “Featured articles”.<sup>258</sup>

The process of assessment is always a subjective process, and it varies according to the involved Wikiproject(s).<sup>259</sup> Wikipedia has established a list of criteria for each ranking of articles; however, each member of a WikiProject can prioritize different criteria and will have different opinions. Therefore, each WikiProject tries to reach a consensus.<sup>260</sup> Some WikiProjects have also created their own systems of assessment based upon their own logic and levels of ranking. Wikipedia allows WikiProjects to differentiate themselves from the established rules, policies, and regulations, if, by doing so, they will engage more with the editing of Wikipedia’s contents.<sup>261</sup> At the same time, the system of assessment determines the quality of each article and, thus, assigns users a topic they need to develop more, improve its coverage, its structure, or its prose. Therefore, Wikipedia creates a self-regulated community, which is based on the users’ self-engagement with the online encyclopedia.

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253 Ibid. For the list of “FA-class articles,” see “Category:FA-Class articles,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:FA-Class\\_articles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:FA-Class_articles)

254 “Wikipedia:Content assessment”.

255 Ibid.

256 Ibid.

257 Ibid.

258 Ibid.

259 Ibid.

260 Ibid.

261 For example, see the WikiProject Military history that has its own criteria of assessment: “Wikipedia:WikiProject Military history/Assessment,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 27, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Military\\_history/Assessment#Quality\\_scale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Military_history/Assessment#Quality_scale)

In addition to that system of content assessment, Wikipedia has created a rewards system that this time does not focus on the articles but on broader users' contributions to the online encyclopedia. That system works with "barnstars," which are digital awards attributed to an editor by another editor. To give that award, an editor should attach the image of "barnstar" to the other editor's talk page and explain why this award is given. There are several standardized types of "barnstars" provided by Wikipedia, but the users can also create new "barnstars" if the existing ones do not necessarily reflect what the users wish to applaud.

There are three categories of "barnstars": general, topical, and Wikipedia-space "barnstars".<sup>262</sup> The "general barnstars" are those awards that do not focus on a specific topic but on broader themes, such as "The Original Barnstar," "The Editor's Barnstar," "The Tireless Contributor Barnstar," "The Photographer's Barnstar," "The Anti-Vandalism Barnstar," etc.<sup>263</sup> The "topical barnstars" refer to a specific topic or subject of interest.<sup>264</sup> Some of these include: "The Society Barnstar," "The Science Barnstar," "The LGBT Barnstar," "The Human Rights Barnstar," "The Women's History Barnstar," "The BLM Barnstar," and several others.<sup>265</sup> The "Wikipedia-space barnstars" are given to editors for their contributions that have taken place behind the scenes, such as "The Copyright Barnstar," "The Template Barnstar," "Excellent User Barnstar," "The Main Page Barnstar," "The Reviewer's Barnstar," etc.<sup>266</sup> All those awards create a hierarchical environment within Wikipedia and, most importantly, motivate editors to make more and better contributions to Wikipedia.

As shown above, Wikipedia has established two different systems of assessment, one focused on the content itself and another focused on the users' engagement with the encyclopedia. Both systems of assessment contribute to the enhancement of users' agency within the Wikipedia community. This means that Wikipedia has created a digital space, which allows for, unconsciously or not, the development of subjectivities and personal reflections, even if its main protocol promotes the concept of neutrality in the production of knowledge. Wikipedia does not aim to impose its rules on the users but to provide them with power to actively engage with their content by creating, writing, editing, and improving Wikipedia articles. However, the agency of users does not stand alone, but it goes through the system of massive bureaucracy that Wikipedia has established.

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<sup>262</sup> "Wikipedia:Barnstars," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 27, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Barnstars>

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

## History as a content category and WikiProjects related to history

Wikipedia as an encyclopedia has developed multiple systems for the categorization of its contents. Most users use search engines, such as Google, to look for a specific page and then they visit the page through Google.<sup>267</sup> However, Wikipedia has also classified its contents into several portals and categories, such as “Culture and the arts,” “Geography and places,” “Health and Fitness,” “History and events,” etc.<sup>268</sup> By clicking on the history portal, the users see the following definition of what history is according to Wikipedia:

History (derived from Ancient Greek ἱστορία (historía) “inquiry; knowledge acquired by investigation”) is the systematic study and documentation of the human past.

The period of events before the invention of writing systems is considered prehistory. “History” is an umbrella term comprising past events as well as the memory, discovery, collection, organization, presentation, and interpretation of these events. Historians seek knowledge of the past using historical sources such as written documents, oral accounts, art and material artifacts, and ecological markers. History is incomplete and still has debatable mysteries.<sup>269</sup>

That definition presents history as “the systematic study and documentation of the human past” and connects it to multiple historical approaches and sources. For Wikipedia, it is not only what is written about the past that is important, but also people’s memories, which reveal information about past events as people remember them.<sup>270</sup> If a user clicks on the full article, the Wikipedia page about history will appear, which contains more details about history as a subject of study.<sup>271</sup> The article provides a more extensive definition of what history is, refers to the development of historiography, different historical methods, areas of study, important historians, and the teaching of history.<sup>272</sup> The page is well-written and well-researched, as it covers several aspects of historical study. It is interesting that Wikipedia does not offer a dry overview of what history is but rather a theoretical essay about how historians approach the past and how this approach has changed

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<sup>267</sup> Brian Keegan, “An Encyclopedia with Breaking News,” in *Wikipedia @20*.

<sup>268</sup> See “Wikipedia:Contents/Portals,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Contents/Portals>

<sup>269</sup> “Portal:History,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:History>

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> For the full article of history, see “History,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History>

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

since the professionalization of history in the nineteenth century. The page includes references to important historians and theorists of history, such as Georges Lefebvre, Fernand Braudel, Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, Michael-Rolph Trouillot, but also contemporary historians, such as Constantin Fasolt, William Cronon, Lynn Hunt, and Natalie Zemon Davis.<sup>273</sup>

Moreover, the page mentions different historiographical approaches that historians have followed since the early ancient period and includes more extensive details on how these methods have been developed over time.<sup>274</sup> There is also information on the different ways historians categorize history, namely according to chronological period, geographical region, and thematic area.<sup>275</sup> In addition, the page offers a historiographical overview of each historical discipline, such as social history, cultural history, economic history, gender history, public history, LGBTQ+ history, intellectual history, etc.<sup>276</sup>

The article relating to history, like all Wikipedia articles, has a “talk page,” which contains all the discussions of the editors about the topic, the questions that have been raised, the debates that have taken place, and the various opinions of the editors on what to add or remove from the page. On the “talk page” of history, users discuss what history is, if history is a social science or part of the humanities, what history does and what sources historians use, how historical writing has changed over time, how they can divide history, differences between history and story, what makes someone a historian, if there is only academic history, if amateurs interested in history can also be historians, etc.<sup>277</sup> All that discussion aims to improve the content of the page and provide a more clarified and updated coverage of the topic. Several editors who have contributed significantly to the development of the page claim to have studied history either at an undergraduate or graduate level.<sup>278</sup> However, most involved editors do not have any educational background in history, but they actively participate in the discussions and make their own arguments about history as a discipline.<sup>279</sup> Overall, the discussion is both serious and relevant, and the users are concerned with research

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273 Ibid.

274 Ibid.

275 Ibid.

276 Ibid.

277 See all three archives of the “talk page,” “Talk:History,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:History>

278 Ibid.

279 For example, this user has studied history and participates in discussions about history: “User:Ishmaelblues,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Ishmaelblues> However, most users have not studied history; they are just interested in history.

questions and historical topics that have been the subject of study by several academic historians and philosophers of history in the last two centuries.

Apart from the definition, in the main history portal there is also a “featured article” column, namely a good quality article on a historical topic, a “featured biography,” and a “featured picture” column, which change content daily.<sup>280</sup> There is also an “On this day” column, in which there are references to historical events that happened on this day in the past, and a “Did you know . . .” column.<sup>281</sup> At the bottom of the same page, there is a column which includes different subcategories of history. There are classifications of history by ethnic groups, location, period, and topic.<sup>282</sup> There are also history-related lists: historical timelines, outlines of history and events, historians, fields of history, history awards, historical controversies, historiography, oral history, philosophy of history, etc.<sup>283</sup> Each subcategory is in the form of a hyperlink, so by clicking these links the users can explore the Wikipedia articles that are related to history. Another column on the page is the “Things you can do,” which mentions all the tasks that Wikipedia editors should do on articles related to history in order to improve them.<sup>284</sup> Those tasks include the creation of new articles, the improvement of grammar and spelling mistakes on existing articles, the further development of articles listed as “stubs,” the placement of images, or the merging of two pages into a single page.<sup>285</sup>

Furthermore, the page includes a list of “Wikipedian historians,” namely all those users who have studied/study history or/and are interested in history.<sup>286</sup> Wikipedia allows users to define themselves as they wish on their profile pages, where users can include descriptions of their education, occupation, relation to history, etc. By examining the profile pages of those users more closely, we notice that some of the users are educated in history at a university level, and others are just interested in learning and writing about history. On their profile pages, Wikipedia users also define their relation to history. Some of them are editors with degrees in history, a few of them are professors and scholars of history, many users characterize themselves as history enthusiasts, and there are also teachers of history, archivists, and librarians. Wikipedia encourages all those “Wikipedian

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**280** “Portal:History”.

**281** *Ibid.*

**282** *Ibid.*

**283** *Ibid.*

**284** *Ibid.*

**285** *Ibid.*

**286** *Ibid.* For the list of “Wikipedian historians,” see “Wikipedia:Wikipedian historians,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 27, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Wikipedian\\_historians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Wikipedian_historians)



historians” to take an active part in the Wikipedia community and to engage with articles related to historical topics.<sup>287</sup> Both professional and amateur historians collaborate to collect, produce, and disseminate historical knowledge.

In this way, Wikipedia does not appear as a single unified community but a broader community that consists of several other smaller communities. It looks like an ocean containing several small islands. There are not only articles related to different subjects, such as history, technology, mathematics, but also several communities of users engaged with those subjects. Wikipedia has named those communities WikiProjects. WikiProjects are “groups of contributors who want to work together as a team to improve Wikipedia”.<sup>288</sup> These groups of users can focus on a specific content topic, a process within the encyclopedia, or a specific task.<sup>289</sup> The WikiProjects take the name of the subject on which they focus. For example, there are WikiProjects such as the WikiProject History, WikiProject Feminism, WikiProject Black Lives Matter, etc.<sup>290</sup> In other words, each WikiProject constitutes a separate community of people, who share common interests and goals, and exist within the Wikipedia community.

The history portal mentions which WikiProjects are related to history.<sup>291</sup> Specifically, it references three main projects: the WikiProject History, the WikiProject Time, and the WikiProject Biography.<sup>292</sup> The WikiProject History is the broadest group and focuses on the improvement of Wikipedia’s contents relating to history.<sup>293</sup> The WikiProject History includes several other WikiProjects that are dedicated to more particular areas of history, such as the WikiProject Ancient Near East, the WikiProject Australian History, WikiProject Dacia, the WikiProject Classical Greece and Rome, the WikiProject Chinese History, the WikiProject European History, the WikiProject Middle Ages, the WikiProject Military History, the WikiProject History of Science, etc.<sup>294</sup>

The WikiProject Time is also connected to history but in broader terms. It aims to better organize articles related to time and supervise how “temporal con-

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287 “Portal:History”.

288 “Wikipedia:WikiProject,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject>

289 *Ibid.*

290 *Ibid.*

291 “Portal:History”.

292 *Ibid.*

293 For the WikiProject History, see “Wikipedia:WikiProject History,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 26, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_History)

294 “Portal:History”.

cepts” are approached on Wikipedia.<sup>295</sup> The WikiProject Time consists of two other related projects, the WikiProject Days of the Year and the WikiProject Years. The former focuses on how to make all the historical anniversary pages consistent both in style and content and the later aims to improve all year-related pages.<sup>296</sup> The last mentioned project is the WikiProject Biography, which is dedicated to the development of articles related to biographies not just of persons but also of organizations, groups, and associations.<sup>297</sup> The WikiProject Biography is the parental project of the WikiProject Composers, the WikiProject Biography/Politics and Government, the WikiProject Saints, and the WikiProject United States Presidents.<sup>298</sup> All those projects divide history into different smaller groups of editors, who collaborate to accomplish specific tasks and are devoted to particular historical areas. At the same time, these projects do not just aim to improve Wikipedia’s content but also to construct specific policies and guidelines on how to write a historical article on specific thematic areas and provide space for discussion between users interested in common historical topics.<sup>299</sup>

To better understand how WikiProjects work, Wikipedia provides a very intriguing definition. It points out that “a WikiProject is fundamentally a social construct; its success depends on its ability to function as a cohesive group of editors working towards a common goal”.<sup>300</sup> According to that definition, WikiProjects seem to incarnate what Benedict Anderson has called “imagined communities”.<sup>301</sup> These users do not know each other, but they feel part of an “imagined community” of editors. Their interests in specific topics, tasks, or broader processes make them part not only of Wikipedia but of smaller digital “imagined” communities, the WikiProjects. As mass vernacular newspapers made people look beyond their own differences and imagine themselves within the same national community, Wikipedia articles and interests in different subjects allow editors to

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295 “Wikipedia:WikiProject Time,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Time](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Time)

296 See “Wikipedia:WikiProject Days of the Year,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Days\\_of\\_the\\_year](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Days_of_the_year); “Wikipedia:WikiProject Years,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Years](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Years)

297 “Wikipedia:WikiProject Biography,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Biography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Biography)

298 “Portal:History”.

299 For example, see the goals of the WikiProject History, “Wikipedia:WikiProject History”.

300 “Wikipedia:WikiProject Council/Guide,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Council/Guide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Council/Guide)

301 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

imagine themselves as members of WikiProjects and enable them to develop ties with other Wikipedians.<sup>302</sup>

On the English Wikipedia, there are more than 2,000 WikiProjects and 1,000 of them are controlled by 30–2,000 editors.<sup>303</sup> However, all the collaborators on a project are not involved in the same way: they have different roles, focus on different tasks, and have different experiences. The WikiProjects are not provided by Wikipedia; instead, any group of editors can create a new project at any time.<sup>304</sup> Wikipedia encourages that process and offers guides and instructions on how editors can propose and create a new WikiProject.<sup>305</sup>

The WikiProjects can become semi-active or inactive if the involved editors do not engage with the project any longer or if the project does not live up to their initial expectations.<sup>306</sup> From the WikiProjects related to history, which were mentioned above, the WikiProject History is considered to be semi-active or to work slower than it used to.<sup>307</sup> The WikiProject Middle Ages, the WikiProject Biography/Politics and Government are inactive, while the WikiProject Dacia is completely inactive.<sup>308</sup> All the other projects are active. Some of them are more developed than others; however, all mention on their main page that they are based on the collaboration between Wikipedians and encourage news users to participate in their project. Their pages include tips, suggestions on how the involved members should approach the related articles, specific templates for how to edit existing articles, and open tasks that should be accomplished. They also contain lists with “featured articles,” which work as examples for the creation and development of other related articles. There is a list of the involved members of the project and a discussion section, in which the members of the project can share their worries and problems about editing, find solutions, and decide which articles they should develop further. Lastly, the WikiProjects have assessment tables with their articles graded according to their quality and importance.

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302 “Wikipedia:WikiProject Council/Guide”.

303 “Wikipedia:WikiProject”.

304 *Ibid.*

305 On how editors can propose a new WikiProject see, “Wikipedia: WikiProject Council/Proposals,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Council/Proposals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Council/Proposals)

306 “Wikipedia:WikiProject”.

307 “Wikipedia:WikiProject History”.

308 See “Wikipedia:WikiProject Middle Ages,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Middle\\_Ages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Middle_Ages); “Wikipedia:WikiProject Biography/Politics and Government,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Biography/Politics\\_and\\_government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Biography/Politics_and_government); “Wikipedia:WikiProject Dacia,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Dacia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Dacia)

To facilitate the production of historical knowledge, Wikipedia provides educational resources to Wikipedians. I mentioned above the Wiki Education Program which aims to create partnerships between Wikipedia and educational institutions, such as universities, archives, and libraries.<sup>309</sup> This program belongs to the Wiki Education Project, which was created in 2003 in order to encourage Wikipedia editors to use educational resources, such as an archive or a research collection to improve the contents of Wikipedia.<sup>310</sup> As Ian Ramjohn and LiAnna Davis, both founders of Wiki Education Project, argue, they created that project to face up to the problems of “systematic bias,” “racial realism,” “white pride,” and harassment against women, which were detected within the Wikipedia community.<sup>311</sup> By developing partnerships between its editors and educational institutions, Wikipedia aims to train its editors on how to make better contributions to specific topics and, thus, offer better knowledge to the public. In 2019, 20 percent of all new editors on English Wikipedia came from the Wiki Education Project.<sup>312</sup>

Another resource that Wikipedia has created to enhance the production of knowledge is the Wikipedia Library. This project appeared as a response to the critiques that Wikipedia’s contents are not based on reliable sources and are biased.<sup>313</sup> The Wikipedia Library is a research place for active Wikipedia editors, where they can find reliable sources for their work and use them in their edits.<sup>314</sup> As several academic papers, books, and resources are only accessible to those affiliated with universities or other cultural and educational institutions, Wikipedia provides active editors free access to these resources. In that way, editors can find more and better-quality sources and produce more accurate historical knowledge.

As shown in this chapter, Wikipedia has established itself as an important landmark in the history of knowledge and, even more importantly, has signified a broader epistemological shift from knowledge produced by experts to knowledge produced by amateurs and non-professionals. Its public and digital character has led Wikipedia to set out a consensus-based approach to its policies and guidelines, which determine the production of knowledge and the users’ behavior

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**309** “The Wiki Education Project,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://wikiedu.org/> For an analysis of the Wiki Education Project, see Ramjohn and Davis, “Equity, Policy, and Newcomers,” in *Wikipedia @20*.

**310** “The Education Project, About Us,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://wikiedu.org/about-us/>

**311** Ramjohn and Davis, “Equity, Policy, and Newcomers”.

**312** *Ibid.*

**313** Orlovitz, “How Wikipedia Drove Professors Crazy, Made Me Sane, and Almost Saved the Internet”.

**314** “The Wikipedia Library,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:The\\_Wikipedia\\_Library](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:The_Wikipedia_Library)

within the Wikipedia community. All these policies initially seem to restrict the agency of Wikipedia users and make editors passive receptors of established rules, methods, and guidelines. However, by closely examining the wider Wikipedia system, those policies constitute principles that form a framework of interaction between editors, and between editors and Wikipedia contents. They do not restrict users' agency but enhance the active role of users within the community by making it clear that users should prioritize their own involvement in the encyclopedia and not adhere to the meticulous application of all established rules. Wikipedia promotes creativity and active engagement, not the accomplishment of written tasks.

At the same time, each subject category of Wikipedia constitutes a group of collaborators who are interested in a common topic. The members of these groups focus on a specific subject and participate in discussions about the articles related to that subject; they share their worries and their goals about which articles to create or improve, and what to add or remove in relation to the articles' contents. Each subject also consists of other sub-groups of users, the WikiProjects that focus on even more particular thematic areas. Therefore, Wikipedia allows users to place themselves into groups of collaborators according to what they are interested in, but not necessarily to what they have studied. Professors of history, archivists, and librarians collaborate with history enthusiasts to produce historical knowledge, cover historical topics, create and edit historical articles. Their hierarchical positions on Wikipedia are not based on their degrees or their knowledge about the subject but on their experience and the quality of their contributions on Wikipedia. Even though Wikipedia shares many common epistemological characteristics with historical scholarship, it constitutes a separate world with its own rules, principles, and ways to engage the public to produce historical knowledge.

Overall, my analysis does not imply that Wikipedia should be regarded as a “perfect” community in which anyone can take part and contribute equally to the production of history. There are several studies that have highlighted the various problems Wikipedia has, such as its biased content, the perceived gender gap, its predominantly white and male-centered character, and which have made suggestions to Wikipedia about how to deal with these challenges.<sup>315</sup> In contrast, in this chapter, I have shown how Wikipedia has managed to become a public space that allows people to produce, discuss, and debate history. Of course, the digital set-up of Wikipedia, including its policies, guidelines, rules, and hierarchy, creates a

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<sup>315</sup> See Massa and Zelenkauskaitė, “Gender Gap in Wikipedia Editing: A Cross-Language Comparison,” 85–96; Bourdeloie and Vicente, “Contributing to Wikipedia: A Question of Gender,” 147–60; Vrana, et al., “Towards a Wikipedia For and From Us All”; Evans, et al., “What We Talk About When We Talk About Community”.

complicated and multilayered system of bureaucracy and surveillance that defines which ideas and contributions will end up in the main articles. However, the main logic behind Wikipedia, at least on a basic level, is to encourage its users to become active participants in the production of historical knowledge by taking part in projects related to their interests, discussing how history should be represented in the Wikipedia articles, making accurate and reliable contributions, and thus, become experienced users eligible for awards and recognition within the Wikipedia community. The question of how Wikipedia users engage with history, while they try to construct historical knowledge, I will answer in the following chapter.

## Chapter 2

# Reconstructing the Distant Past on Wikipedia: The Great Depression and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Both the guidelines and the organizational structures of Wikipedia enable the active agency of Wikipedia users within the Wikipedia community. In this chapter, I examine the agency of Wikipedia users by exploring how they engage with history and contribute to the production of historical knowledge. Specifically, I focus on four case studies, four traumatic historical events that have shaped modern United States history and had a significant impact on the world.<sup>1</sup> My aim is not to analyze trauma as an analytical category but explore how Wikipedia users engage with history, while they write about a traumatic historical event. Trauma works as a thematic framework that characterizes the four case studies and advances an exploration of Wikipedia users' interaction with history. In other words, trauma allows a better understanding of how Wikipedians have been "touched by the past" – to borrow from Alison Landsberg – and how they produce historical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The Wikipedia pages I will examine are the Great Depression, the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Vietnam War, and the September 11 attacks.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I will explore the production of history on the pages of the Great Depression and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while in the next chapter I will analyze the Vietnam War and September 11 attacks. The point of that division is to show whether there are differences in users' engagement with history between the four case studies regarding the historical context of the event and users' lived experiences.

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1 On trauma and history, see Michael S. Roth, *Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Eelco Runia, *Moved by the Past. Discontinuity and Mutation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?" *History and Theory* 55 (October 2016): 375–400.

2 Alison Landsberg, *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 10.

3 See "Great Depression," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Depression](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression); "Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki); "Vietnam War," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War); "September 11 attacks," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September\\_11\\_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks)

All four of these pages are part of the WikiProject United States History, a group of editors who are tasked with the coverage of topics related to the history of the modern United States.<sup>4</sup> My study focuses mainly on the “talk pages” of the Wikipedia articles, as these “talk pages” reveal the discussions between the participants who contribute to the editing and improvement of the articles. As the sociologist René König has argued, “talk pages” constitute arenas where discussions about important Wikipedia issues take place.<sup>5</sup> To make their action legitimate, editors make discussion posts while they edit an article.<sup>6</sup> Thus, any discussion or debate in the “talk pages” refers to potential changes in the contents of the article. This means that I study the “talk pages” in connection to the main pages of the Wikipedia articles. At the same time, I use the “view history” page for each entry, which contains just the logs of all the changes (without the discussion), together with copies of older versions of the articles. The “talk pages” of the four case studies are very extensive, each discussion page on its own would constitute a topic for a potential doctoral dissertation. For that reason, I have used some samples of the discussions that took place in the “talk pages,” the most significant and representative examples, that reveal how Wikipedia editors perceive history and write about it. I examine users’ comments in their contexts by explaining their “source,” “audience,” “content,” “intention,” and “effects”.<sup>7</sup>

The goal of this chapter is to show that the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia is a complex process, in which Wikipedians write about history based on a combination of personal experiences, memories, personal experiences from the past, academic scholarship, and Wikipedia guidelines. Wikipedia editors do not just write about history, but they actively engage with the past by agreeing and disagreeing about history, reading books and articles, sharing their personal memories, giving justice to the past, and preventing the past from falling into oblivion. All these levels of engagement comply with the established rules and guidelines that I presented in the previous chapter and determine the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia. Of course, Wikipedians’ engagement with history is not stable but changes in each case study. It depends on the historical context of the event and the relation of Wikipedians to history. Therefore, I have divided the four cases into two chapters. In the current chapter, I study the Great

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4 See “Wikipedia:WikiProject United States History,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_United\\_States\\_History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_United_States_History)

5 König, “Wikipedia. Between lay participation and elite knowledge representation,” 163.

6 *Ibid.*

7 For how to study comments on the Web, see Joseph Reagle, *Reading the Comments. Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web* (London, England and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).



Depression and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two historical events that belong to the earlier twentieth century; in the next chapter, I examine the Vietnam War and the September 11 attacks, two historical events of the recent past. The logic behind that division is not only chronological but relates to how Wikipedians experience historical events. I follow the theory of the historian and sociologist James Loewen. In his book on American high-school history textbooks, Loewen explores the time distinction in Eastern and Central African cultures between “sasha” and “zamani”.<sup>8</sup> The former is the recent past, the “living-dead” past, which lives in “the memories of the living,” while the latter is the distant past, which is “not forgotten but revered”.<sup>9</sup> Every historical event starts as “sasha” and then can be transformed into “zamani”. As I will show in the following pages, the Eastern and Central African notion that Loewen employed unveils the different levels of Wikipedians’ engagement with the production of historical knowledge. In the first two case studies, which belong to the distant past, or “zamani,” lived experience plays a lesser role, and interpretation of scholarship plays a stronger role, while in the following two historical events of the recent past, or “sasha,” editors have direct experiences from the past and try to make them part of the broader historical narrative.

## The Great Depression

The Wikipedia page about the Great Depression, which began in the United States in 1929 and expanded worldwide, constitutes a significant historical article according to Wikipedia’s rating system. The article was created in 2001 and has received 11,095 total edits as of 2021.<sup>10</sup> It was nominated as a “Social sciences and society good article” until July 2015 and has been listed as a “level-3 vital article” in History.<sup>11</sup> The article has also been supported by WikiProject Economics, the WikiProject United States, and WikiProject United States History.<sup>12</sup> The WikiPro-

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<sup>8</sup> James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me. Everything Your American History Textbook Got Me Wrong* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the statistics of the Wikipedia page, see “Great Depression – page statistics,” *Wikipedia*, accessed *Wikipedia*, accessed March 11, 2021, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Great\\_Depression](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Great_Depression)

<sup>11</sup> “Talk:Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

ject Economics has rated the article as “B-class” on the project’s quality scale and as “High importance” on the project’s importance scale.<sup>13</sup> The WikiProject United States has rated the article as “B-class” on the project’s quality scale and as “Top importance” on the project’s importance scale.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the page had 391,119 views in the last sixty days.<sup>15</sup>

The current contents of the main page cover several topics that range from how the Great Depression started, the reason why the crisis took place, the different theories that try to explain the Great Depression, to how the economy recovered and the socio-economic effects in all related countries.<sup>16</sup> At the end of the page, there is a section that compares the Great Depression with the Great Recession of 2008.<sup>17</sup> As we can see in the history of the page, the article was created on September 16, 2001, and has been edited up until November 2020.<sup>18</sup> Apart from the textual contents of the page, there are also visual elements. At the beginning of the page, the main thing that the reader can see is Dorothea Lange’s photo, *Migrant Mother* (1936), which is placed on the right side of the article.<sup>19</sup> The photo depicts destitute pea pickers in California in March 1936, centering on Florence Owens Thompson, a 32-year-old mother of seven children.<sup>20</sup> In the photo, there is only Thompson with two of her children, who are crying alongside their mother. The main subject of the photo, the mother, looks disappointed, desperate, and hopeless. There are also other smaller images that depict the harmful effects of the Depression. They show unemployed men outside a soup kitchen in Depression-era Chicago in 1931, a crowd gathering at the intersection of Wall Street and Broad Street after the 1929 crash, crowds outside the Bank of United States in New York after its failure in 1931, an impoverished American family living in a shanty, unemployed men marching in Toronto, and many other related scenes of the Great Depression.<sup>21</sup>

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 “Great Depression – page statistics”.

16 “Great Depression”.

17 Ibid.

18 “Talk:Great Depression: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Great\\_Depression&dir=prev&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Talk:Great_Depression&dir=prev&action=history)

19 Ibid.

20 “Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* depicts destitute pea pickers in California, centering on Florence Owens Thompson, age 32, a mother of seven children, in Nipomo, California, March 1936,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lange-MigrantMother02.jpg>

21 For the use of images on Wikipedia, see “Wikipedia:Images,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Images>

The images coexist with graphs and statistics that present the US annual real GDP from 1910 to 1960, the unemployment rate in the US between 1910 and 1960, the money supply during the Great Depression, the Depression from an international perspective, and several other economic indicators.<sup>22</sup> All these visual elements attribute different historical perspectives to the representation of the Great Depression on Wikipedia. On the one hand, the graphs and statistics offer a neutral and impersonal view of the event focusing on how the economy changed during that time, the fall of GDP, and the decrease in the money supply. On the other hand, the reader of the article is encouraged to realize the “devastating effects” of the economic depression through the affective practices that the pictures depict. The reader is not only informed about the Great Depression but is encouraged to think and mainly to feel the negative effects of the Depression on society and the problems that it caused. The aim of these photographs is not only to transmit the meaning of the past but to highlight the traumatic character of the Great Depression and create a sentimental relation between the past and the present.<sup>23</sup>

However, the contents of the page have not just appeared in the main article, they are the result of broader discussion and debate between the editors involved. Also, the contents of the page is not static, but has changed over time since the creation of the article in 2001. The initial edition of the article in 2001 included only five short paragraphs, which simply provided an overview of what happened in the US in 1929, a short reference to Germany, a country that notably suffered from the crisis and which led to the rise of Adolf Hitler, and another short reference to the New Deal.<sup>24</sup> Overall, the article was inadequate, lacked detail and deeper analysis, and its prose was not professional enough for an encyclopedic article. Gradually, the article started to become more extensive and detailed. In 2003, its prose had improved together with its structure, which now

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22 “Great Depression”.

23 On the connection between history and images, see Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); Jennifer Tucker and Tina Campt, “Entwined Practices: Engagements with Photography in Historical Inquiry,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 1–8; Michael S. Roth, “Photographic Ambivalence and Historical Consciousness,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 82–94; Elizabeth Edwards, “Photography and the Material Performance of the Past,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 130–50; Gregory Paschalidis, “Images of History and the Optical Unconscious,” *Historein* 4 (2003): 33–44.

24 “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=340280721](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=340280721)

included three separate sections on Roosevelt’s New Deal, the influence of World War II, and the end of the Great Depression.<sup>25</sup>

By clicking on the relevant “talk page,” users can view the history of the discussions that have taken place in relation to the article. As can be seen from the editing activity between 2001 and 2021, the article received most of its edits from 2004 to 2009 and 2013 to 2015.<sup>26</sup> The first discussion posts are not dated, but probably appeared in 2003.<sup>27</sup> The first comments focused on what caused the Great Depression in the United States, the different theories of explanation, how the Great Depression was expanded to other European countries, and how Roosevelt faced the crisis.<sup>28</sup> The first editor, who started the discussion thread, was Larry Sanger himself, one of the co-founders of Wikipedia.<sup>29</sup> He signed off his comments as “LMS” and wrote the following:

- (1) Removed “American” from “of American history”. Books are written about the history of the Depression in Europe . . . Wikipedia is an international encyclopedia – has to be, since it’s on the Internet!
- (2) I cannot parse this sentence, so I can’t fix it either: “It was an extended economic contraction that ended with the government induced World War II spending economic expansion”. I also wonder how widely- agreed upon this explanation is.
- (3) Finally – I’m no historian, so I’m just asking – was it the events in the U.S. that led to the worldwide depression? Is that widely-agreed upon as well?<sup>30</sup>

Larry Sanger’s comment prompted the participation of several other users on the “talk page,” who started to discuss how the Great Depression took place, when it first appeared, whether it started in the US or in another country, what the economy of the United States looked like during the 1920s, what the economic effects of the crisis were, and when the economy of the US started to recover.<sup>31</sup> Some editors had different views on the Great Depression. For example, the user “mike

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<sup>25</sup> See, “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=736595](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=736595)

<sup>26</sup> “Great Depression – Year counts,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Great\\_Depression#year-counts](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Great_Depression#year-counts)

<sup>27</sup> “Talk:Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression)

<sup>28</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 1,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_1)

<sup>29</sup> For the debate between Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger on whether Sanger was co-founder of Wikipedia, see Dariusz Jemielniak, *Common Knowledge? An Ethnography of Wikipedia* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 156.

<sup>30</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 1”.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

dill” argued that “the events in the USA were probably the trigger for the depression, but not the real cause”.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, “mike dill” pointed out:

The economic situation in most parts of the world was a real mess ever since the end of World War 1. The appearance of prosperity 1919–1929 was an illusion. Unemployment was high, a lot of people were poor, and most of the rich had money and shares that turned out to be either borrowed, embezzled, or worthless. The big crash was going to happen somewhere, and no matter where it happened it was going to spread.<sup>33</sup>

The user “Jhanley” reacted to that post and argued:

I know little about the depression in other countries, but for the U.S. this is not true. The depression began to ease after the Supreme Court struck down FDR’s New Deal legislation, but after they began to uphold his legislation, the economy had another serious downturn in 1937 (I think). The economy was on an improving trend prior to our entry into WWII, but was nowhere near its pre-depression status.<sup>34</sup>

Following the same line of thinking, the user “(DJK)” got involved in the discussion by sharing their readings and understanding of the Great Depression. (DJK) mentioned:

Someone who has read Frederick Lewis Allen’s “Only Yesterday” and “Since Yesterday” more recently than 40 years ago needs to work this article over. There is a great deal to be said about the extreme depth of the depression (25% unemployment in the US at one point), Hoover’s unfortunate attempts to maintain budget balance (which I believe he himself abandoned near the end of his term); the failure of the US banking system in 1932, etc.<sup>35</sup>

The last two users disagreed with “mike dill” and offered different interpretations about the Great Depression. However, the discussion did not just aim to explore what had happened in the past, but aimed to change the representation of the Great Depression on the main page.

In July 2003, the editors started to express their concerns about the current form of the article, as it presented the Great Depression as a British Monetary Crisis that did not take place in the US but started in Britain and then expanded to the US.<sup>36</sup> Also, the article did not include an analysis of the factors that caused the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> For the version of the article that existed on July 17, 2003, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=1169970](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=1169970)

Great Depression.<sup>37</sup> On July 20, 2003, several editors started to share their disagreements about the then current version of the article and suggested ways to improve it. Specifically, the user “172,” one of the editors with the highest number of contributions to the article, argued that the article did not comply with the NPOV policies of Wikipedia and presented a right-wing view of the Great Depression, as it did not include any Keynesian analysis.<sup>38</sup> The user also criticized the article for its bias, as it did not mention all of the reasons that caused the Great Depression in the US. The other participants agreed with the statement of user “172”. One user, “mav,” responded to “172” and encouraged them to edit the article, fix the problems that existed, and to remove “the hopeless offending paragraphs,” but not to rewrite the whole article, as the work of other people would be lost.<sup>39</sup> Along similar lines, the user “FearÉIREANN,” who described themselves as a historian on their own profile page, wrote:

Having read the article I do not think the rewrite done is salvageable. Its analysis is so biased even Margaret Thatcher would have blanched reading it. It is so inaccurate and POV it is mindblowing [sic]; it is the equivalent of the IRA writing an Irish history article or Saddam Hussein (or rather his ludicrous war spokesman) writing an account of the war in Iraq. The version 172 reverted to is deeply flawed, by far less so than the rubbish which there now. IMHO we should use the version 172 reverted to as the starting point and work on it, incorporating from it the less loopy elements of the current article (I'm sure there is something in somewhere that qualifies, though a first and second glance didn't show up much). [ . . . ] This is to history what the X-files is to science. And keeping what is there now as a template would make wiki a laughing stock [sic] among historians of the period. Wiki has many many [sic] good points but its weakness is that some people, if no-one notices, can totally agendise an article to the point where it becomes a totally biased loopy polemic, whether extreme right or extreme left [ . . . ].<sup>40</sup>

As the participants did not find the current version of the article to be sufficiently well-analyzed or the relevant details well-covered, they decided to improve the article by including a section on the causes of the Great Depression and presenting all the different explanations of the event in a neutral way. The user “172” wrote:

I've been working on the causes since we've rescued this article from the ideological hijacking. However, the causes section still requires significant work, along with every other section.

[ . . . ]

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 1”.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. For the user's profile page, see “User:Jtdirl,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Jtdirl>

Two problems stand out above all. One is the lack of social history. Impersonal macroeconomic indicators don't tell us the whole story. Second, the article is Amero-centric (something for which I'm partially responsible).

[. . .]

If anyone's interested in internationalizing this article, I'd be interested in Latin America. I've already written a good deal on the Great Depression in Brazil for the history of Brazil article; [. . .]<sup>41</sup>

The other participants in the discussion did not disagree with that suggestion, so user "172" added a section on the causes of the Great Depression by mentioning the misdistribution of purchasing power, the lack of diversification, the credit structure, and the breakdown of international trade.<sup>42</sup> Other editors, such as "mav" and "G-Man," also took part in the editing process by developing the main contents of the article, such as the introduction, the causes, and the responses.<sup>43</sup>

A few years later, another important discussion thread appeared on the "talk page" of the Great Depression and this time focused both on the causes of the Great Depression and on life during the crisis.<sup>44</sup> In January 2005, some editors criticized the article for presenting only one theory seeking to explain the reason for the appearance of the Great Depression.<sup>45</sup> The user "Stirling Newberry," who also described themselves as a historian, argued that the article needed more work and the inclusion of more materials.<sup>46</sup> The user "172" responded to that comment by arguing:

You're quite right. One of the particular recent changes that bothers me is the insertion of "one theory holds" toward the beginning of each subsection on the origins, which can give someone the impression that these explanations are mutually exclusive.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, the users added the theories of the economists Milton Friedman and Anna Schwartz to the section entitled "The Federal Reserve and the Money Sup-

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<sup>41</sup> "Talk:Great Depression/Archive 1".

<sup>42</sup> See the page on the Great Depression as it was developed by the user "172": "Great Depression," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=1173616](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=1173616)

<sup>43</sup> For the revision history of the article, see "Great Depression: Revision history," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&dir=prev&offset=20030813181016%7C1285005&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&dir=prev&offset=20030813181016%7C1285005&action=history)

<sup>44</sup> "Talk:Great Depression/Archive 2," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_2)

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* For the profile of the user "Stirling Newberry," see "User:Stirling Newberry," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Stirling\\_Newberry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Stirling_Newberry)

<sup>47</sup> "Talk:Great Depression/Archive 2".

ply,” which was part of the broader section on the cause of the Great Depression.<sup>48</sup> The addition of Friedman’s and Schwartz’s theories is strongly connected to the policy of NPOV that I analyzed in the first chapter. The editors were trying to make the article more inclusive by including all the related theories that sought to explain the appearance of the Great Depression.<sup>49</sup>

A few months later, a sentence in the main article provoked a reaction from certain users. Specifically, in the section entitled “the End of the Great Depression,” there was a sentence claiming that the President of the US, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had foreseen the participation of the US in World War II as a solution to the problems of the Great Depression.<sup>50</sup> In October 2005, the user “stu” brought this topic into the discussion by asking other editors if there were any sources that support this statement, because it looked “arbitrary and speculative”.<sup>51</sup> An unregistered user, who signed their comment as “Kristopher Sandoval”, intervened in the discussion and suggested:

Though that quote indeed has no direct evidence, the idea that a war would boost global and United States economy was prevalent, and fiscally obvious. Also, through Roosevelt’s actions prewar, we can tell that he was building for the new war. The history books will tell you that we knew nothing about Pearl Harbor, when in fact we knew that the Japanese would strike by air . . . we just didn’t know where. We assumed that they would attack major ports in San Francisco, but the Hawaiiin [sic] Islands were a prime and simple target; we were caught with our pants down, yes, but Roosevelt had already started making a belt. [ . . . ] So in conclusion, no, we don’t have exact proof or quotes on that . . . but the circumstantial [sic] evidence is there, and pretty convincing.<sup>52</sup>

This intervention prompted a strong reaction from the user “Trekphiler,” who found the previous response illogical, as no one could predict that the Second

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<sup>48</sup> See the version of the page, “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=9292546](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=9292546)

<sup>49</sup> This does not mean that we should not consider the several studies which have criticized Wikipedia for being biased, male-centric, Western-centric, and exclusive of “marginalized” stories. See Joseph Reagle and Jackie Koerner, ed., *Wikipedia @20*; Jemelniak, *Common Knowledge?*, 77; Elizabeth Losh, Jacqueline Wernimont, Laura Wexler, Hong-An Wu, “Putting the Human Back into the Digital Humanities: Feminism, Generosity, and Mess,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), accessed August 10, 2021, <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/cfe1b125-6917-4095-9d56-20487aa0b867#ch10>

<sup>50</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 2”. For the version of the main article at that time, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=30066143](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=30066143)

<sup>51</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 2”.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



World War would take place and contribute to the end of the Great Depression. The user “Trekphiler” argued:

we knew that the Japanese would strike by air . . . we just didn’t know where. We assumed that they would attack major ports in San Francisco? Nonsense. The Japanese were expected to strike in Thailand (where a task force had been sighted), or the Soviet Union (where the Kwantung Army had been itching for a fight since 1937), or (just maybe) the Philippines (where the U.S. had been building up #s B-17s, unintentionally making a valuable target). San Francisco was never considered a target (except by racist California pols who arranged the unconscionable removals . . .). Nobody in DC expected a Japanese air attack; the war was expected to begin by subversion & sabotage, which is precisely why all the aircraft were clustered at AAF bases in HI – to prevent it. Get your facts straight.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, the user “Trekphiler” removed the original sentence from the main article, which had prompted “Sandoval’s” earlier comment related to Roosevelt potentially predicting US involvement in WWII as a solution to the Great Depression.<sup>54</sup> This case constituted an example of how Wikipedia editors discuss the problems that can exist in a given article and try to improve it. In this case, the users realized that this sentence did not make any sense and most importantly was not based on reliable secondary sources.

Discussions on the quality of articles’ contents are common on Wikipedia. A related example took place in December 2008. The involved editors created a thread, in which they discussed the possibility of merging the contents of a Wikipedia article on the causes of the Great Depression with the main article on the Great Depression itself.<sup>55</sup> Specifically, the user “work permit” urged other editors to merge the two articles, as the section on the causes of the Great Depression article was very long and there was another more detailed article that focused only on the causes of the economic crisis.<sup>56</sup> Several other users agreed with that suggestion, as it would improve the overall analysis of the article and the coverage of the relevant causes, and it would make the two articles more consistent. These other users got involved in the discussion (Figure 5).

This discussion is a typical example of how Wikipedia users can reach a consensus and, therefore, decide to make an editing change in an article. As the edit

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> For the page after this edit had been made, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=30665272](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=30665272)

<sup>55</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 3,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_3) For the article on the causes of the Great Depression, see “Causes of the Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Causes\\_of\\_the\\_Great\\_Depression](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Causes_of_the_Great_Depression)

<sup>56</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 3”.

yes merge is a good idea. [Rjensen \(talk\)](#) 10:01, 1 December 2008 (UTC)

**Support** merge and summary per [WP:SUMMARY dissolve](#)<sup>mk</sup> 05:55, 13 December 2008 (UTC)

- **Support** I think we definitely need to do something because they both fall under the "Great Depression" heading, and if someone is looking this information up they will want to know the causes. Perhaps if we provide a brief overview at the beginning of the article and then go into more depth under a specific "Causes" section. [Cajones \(talk\)](#) 17:34, 19 January 2009 (UTC)
- **Support** The section on causes in the Great Homeless article, while important, is disproportionately large and needs reorganization. The differences between the "causes" section and "Causes of the Great Depression" article is also troubling, and a merger would address this. However, care should be taken in writing the new summary, for it is vital that the basic information is well covered for the casual reader. --[Alex60466176 \(talk\)](#) 19:46, 25 January 2009 (UTC)
- **Support!** Definitely. It would help to keep the Great Depression article itself better in balance and eliminate confusion while giving the opportunity to confront and resolve inconsistencies. Of course, it will be important to ensure that the summary itself is in synch with the Causes article. -- [Will O'Neil \(talk\)](#) 20:49, 28 February 2009 (UTC)
- **Negative!** I think that it would lose something, besides where would u put the link to the causes? post to DCollins52's talk page ur opinion on this, im not signed in right now

[24.110.2.116 \(talk\)](#) 00:41, 29 March 2009 (UTC)

I'm not sure it is possible to provide just a short summary on causes of the Great Depression because of the complexity of the issue. Also, article isn't too long so I think there is no real need to remove most of the section. -- [Vision Thing](#) -- 21:04, 9 March 2009 (UTC)

I've begun by rearranging the article sections to mirror each other. --[Work permit \(talk\)](#) 02:50, 3 April 2009 (UTC)

- **Support** Though somewhat late to see, I agree with the suggestion. Could also assist in rearranging and editing work if needed. Drop a message in my talk page if need be. --[Eleman \(talk\)](#) 11:20, 14 April 2009 (UTC)

**Figure 5:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_3).

history of the article reveals, after the discussion, the user “work permit” updated the section on the causes of the Great Depression by adding information from the other Wikipedia page.<sup>57</sup> This example shows that Wikipedia users try to produce non-biased and inclusive historical narratives about the past and, in this case, to represent the Great Depression in a fair way. They try to do that by following the guidelines of Wikipedia and reaching a consensus about their editing choices.

As in historical scholarship, the present defines the topics of discussion about any historical event, and more significantly it provokes debate on what a historical article should look like. This is obvious in the construction of the Great Depression article. In 2008, while the financial crisis of 2008 was looming, an unregistered user commented on the “talk page” of the Great Depression article that a new economic crisis had started to appear. The user wrote:

This is just a discussion placeholder. But it will soon be a current event. The financial markets are unstable as the credit crisis is expanding daily.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> For the revision history of the article, when this discussion took place, see “Great Depression: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&offset=20090629055156%7C299257759&limit=250&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&offset=20090629055156%7C299257759&limit=250&action=history)

<sup>58</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 3”.

Another unregistered user replied to that comment by expressing their strong disagreement with that claim. This user wrote:

That sort of Chicken Little talk is foolish and insane if you look at any of the signs of what a “Great Depression” is. The foolishness of people seems to have no bounds. No part of the Western World is even NEAR a Depression.<sup>59</sup>

This user did not agree with the comment that a new economic crisis was taking place at the time. Another participant then got involved in the discussion by agreeing with that opinion:

Agreed. That said I have heard media coverage of economists making statements on how the current recession could become a depression. It might be worth noting – with sources, of course – in the “Other depressions” section.<sup>60</sup>

This third user, however, did suggest the inclusion of this potential recession in the section of the article entitled “Other depressions”.<sup>61</sup> One more user then entered into the discussion, who agreed that a recession was taking place and criticized the previous commentators for having not realized how serious the situation was. This user argued:

You’ll eat those words soon enough. Fact is the overwhelming cause of the GD was speculation on the stock market and people buying on margin. It was when the brokerage houses made margin calls that things fell apart and 1/3 of the perceived wealth evaporated. Checks and balances were put in place to limit the amount people can go on margin since then by the SEC. But . . . remember all the advertisements in the 90’s about taking a 2nd mortgage out on your house at 150% of it’s value. That is, in essence, going out on margin in real estate. The foreclosure notice is the margin call. This is happening RIGHT NOW. [ . . . ]<sup>62</sup>

The discussion stopped at this point without any editing changes in the article, but a few months later a similar thread appeared on the “talk page”.<sup>63</sup> The user “Irpsit” brought up the topic of the ongoing economic crisis again. “Irpsit” wrote:

I would suggest adding a topic in this article, about the possibility that many economists predict that we can be about to enter a new Great Depression. Realize that a part of the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. For the version of the page at that time, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=243265955#Other\\_Great\\_Depressions](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=243265955#Other_Great_Depressions)

<sup>62</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 3”.

<sup>63</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 4,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_4#A\\_new\\_Great\\_Depression](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_4#A_new_Great_Depression)

thinkers predicts that recovery will be soon, and others predict that it should last 5 to 10 years, which then it could be called as a new Great Depression due to the similarity of changes. Maybe a list of those predictions and how the lifestyles change, would be interesting. At least this recession is already promising to last a few years if not more, in a quite more dramatic way than previous ones and with a powerful worldwide impact, unlike previous recessions.<sup>64</sup>

This time, other users did not disagree with that argument; however, some of them did not find it historically accurate to compare the ongoing crisis with the Great Depression. The user “GreatGodOm” responded, acknowledging that many people were indeed comparing the current crisis to the Great Depression, but suggested that it would be better to wait to see if the current crisis would become a “new Great Depression”.<sup>65</sup> Another user offered a different interpretation of whether it would be appropriate to mention this new economic crisis within the article on the Great Depression. This user, “Mrzaius,” suggested that there should be a reference to the ongoing crisis, as any Depression constitutes a significant historical event, so it is logical to compare other related events with the Great Depression.<sup>66</sup> Another participant, the user “Bri bri000,” offered their own perspective by suggesting that the financial crisis was likely a result of the Great Depression itself, so a comparative study of both crises would be useful.<sup>67</sup> A very interesting intervention was made by the user “John Nagle,” who agreed that a crisis was taking place, but suggested that the Wikipedia editors should allow for more time to see what would happen, and then they could decide whether it was worth including this new economic crisis within the article’s contents. Specifically, “Jhn Nagle” mentioned:

In time there may be a rename. What we now call World War I was, prior to WWII, referred to as “The World War”. It’s too early to say. Usage of the phrase “second great depression” in reliable sources is picking up. [1] At some point, we may be using the phrase “First Great Depression” about the 1929 one. But not yet.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, a few months later, on October 7, 2009, a widely-recognized editor, “Rickyab,” included a reference to the ongoing economic crisis in the article on the Great Depression.<sup>69</sup> “Rickyab” added the following to the page: “People have

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> For the profile of this editor, see “User:Rickyab,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Rickyab>

been taking to calling the current economic recession the “Great Recession.”<sup>70</sup> This claim was based on various online newspaper articles.<sup>71</sup> In the following years, as the crisis became more evident, the editors further developed the topic; and, gradually, they created a separate section named “Comparison with the Great Recession,” which included a more extensive analysis of the relation between the two crises.<sup>72</sup>

Present and contemporary developments force Wikipedia users to constantly keep Wikipedia articles updated. The computational social scientist, Brian Keegan, has highlighting this characteristic of Wikipedia by pointing out how fast Wikipedia updates its contents.<sup>73</sup> For Keegan, this is very innovative, as Wikipedia is the only encyclopedia that can cover the current news so quickly.<sup>74</sup> Thinking in these terms about history, the examples above reveal how the present determines the past and how Wikipedia users make connections between the past and the present.<sup>75</sup> By detecting similarities between historical events of the past and current developments, Wikipedia users try to decodify and make sense of any contemporary developments that have taken place.

In this manner, Wikipedia users have examined and re-examined the Great Depression in light of contemporary developments. The section “Comparison with the Great Recession” offers a comparative analysis between the two crises and, thus, represents the Great Depression in relation to the financial crisis of 2008. It is also worth mentioning that a version of the Wikipedia article entitled “financial crisis of 2007–2008” started as follows: “The financial crisis of 2007–2008, also known as the global financial crisis and the 2008 financial crisis, was a severe worldwide economic crisis considered by many economists to have been the most serious financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, to which it is often compared”.<sup>76</sup> As David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig have noticed in their

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70 “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=318507259#Other\\_%22great\\_depressions%22](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=318507259#Other_%22great_depressions%22)

71 *Ibid.*

72 See, for example, the current version of the article, “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Depression#Comparison\\_with\\_the\\_Great\\_Recession](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression#Comparison_with_the_Great_Recession)

73 Brian C. Keegan, “A History of Newswork on Wikipedia,” *Proceedings of the 9th International Symposium on Open Collaboration* (August 2013): 1. See also Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*, 219–20.

74 Keegan, “A History of Newswork on Wikipedia”.

75 On the relation of the present to history, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present. Time and Contemporary Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

76 That version of the article existed for several years, see “Financial crisis of 2007–2008,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Financial\\_crisis\\_of\\_2007%E2%80%932008&oldid=917966712](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Financial_crisis_of_2007%E2%80%932008&oldid=917966712) In the last year, the article has been changed and does not include that sentence any more.

survey about how Americans understand the past, “by revisiting or reliving the past they [Americans] could reinterpret it as they unearthed new sources but also as they experienced new needs in the present”.<sup>77</sup> This is exactly how Wikipedians engage with history. By looking at the present, they define and redefine historical knowledge and, therefore, keep Wikipedia articles up to date.

The users try to make sense of what happened in the past, express their historical understandings of the Great Depression, share their thoughts, and try to reconstruct the past in a neutral way. This does not mean that personal stories are not part of their engagement with history. In 2009, some editors expressed their worries about the way in which the end of the Great Depression was defined in the article. During that time, the main article included the following sentence: “America’s Great Depression ended in 1941 with America’s entry into World War II”.<sup>78</sup> The user “Jive Dadson” did not agree with the statement that the Second World War ended the Great Depression; as such, the user intervened in the discussion to offer their own perspective on the topic. “Jive Dadson” user wrote:

That’s absurd. It’s an extreme example of Bastiat’s broken window fallacy. The fact that people in the US were building bombs and bombers for destruction overseas did not bring prosperity to the US. How could it? Prosperity returned only after the soldiers did. Young men digging fox holes in North Africa and Europe did not improve the domestic economy. Ask my 90 year old mom. She used ration books to live hand-to-mouth while my father slept in the mud on Anzio Beach. Wanton destruction of goods and non-productive employment never have and never will bring prosperity. Perhaps the morons who dreamed up the Cash For Clunkers program read Wikipedia. If I sound disgusted, it’s only because I am.<sup>79</sup>

This user challenged the argument that the Second World War had provided a final solution to the Great Depression by sharing their personal memories on Wikipedia. Specifically, “Jive Dadson” referred to the story of their 90-year-old mother, who used ration books to survive during the beginning of the Second World War. This memory of their mother seemed to contradict the version of the historical past that Wikipedia presented. In their discussion post, “Jive Dadson” also mentioned that their father had fought in the battle of Anzio during the Second World War, so it would be hypocritical to present the participation of the US in the Second World War as the final solution to the Great Depression. For this user, writing about history not only meant writing about the past, but also giving honor to those who suffered from the historical events of the past. Writing about history on Wikipedia has a performative dimension. For “Jive Dadson,” the argu-

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<sup>77</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 201.

<sup>78</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 4”.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

ment that the Second World War signified the end of the Great Depression was disrespectful to the memories of their mother and father, who suffered from the Great Depression whilst also taking part in the war. These memories, even if they are not historically accurate, reveal information – as Michael Frisch puts it – about “how the past does or doesn’t figure in our lives, and what this in turn tells us about both history and ourselves”.<sup>80</sup>

The user “Rjensen,” a historian, and one of the most avid contributors to historical articles, and the editor with the most edits on the article relating to the Great Depression, responded to “Jive Dadson”:

not absurd at all. Bastiat ASSUMES people are fully employed at all times. But what if only 80% of the people are fully employed at time 1 and 100% at time 2. That represents a huge jump in output. Furthermore some libertarians (like Higgs) assume that collective goods–like winning a war–are unmeasurable and thus unimportant. Observers at the time and since are agreed the American people placed a very high value on winning the war. They had a high priority on giving US soldiers the best planes, tanks, ships, uniforms, doctors, etc. They also had jobs and paychecks and could buy steak instead of beans. That’s prosperity.<sup>81</sup>

“Rjensen” challenged the argument put forward by “Jive Dadson” and argued that it is accurate to identify the end of the Great Depression with the involvement of the US in the Second World War, as the war increased the US’s demand for goods. The discussion did not continue, and the page still mentions that the beginning of World War II ended the Great Depression.<sup>82</sup> The fact that Wikipedia users often share their memories to change how a historical event is represented is significant for how users engage with history and try to contribute to the production of historical knowledge, even if their memories are not historically accurate. Here, the concept of “postmemory,” as it has been introduced by the scholar of comparative literature and gender studies, Marianne Hirsch, is useful and explains the relationship between generations and traumatic events that preceded their births.<sup>83</sup> According to Hirsch, the “transgenerational transmission of trauma” is not based on a recall of the past but on a constructive process characterized by “imaginative in-

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<sup>80</sup> Frisch, “The Memory of History,” 9–23.

<sup>81</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 4”. For the page statistics, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Great\\_Depression](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Great_Depression) For the profile page of “Rjensen,” see “User:Rjensen,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Rjensen>

<sup>82</sup> See the current version on Wikipedia and, more specifically, the section entitled “World War II and recovery”: “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Depression](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression)

<sup>83</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103–28.

vestment, projection, and creation”.<sup>84</sup> That approach to the past characterizes Wikipedia users’ relationship with the traumatic experience of the Great Depression.

In another discussion, an unregistered user shared their personal memories about how the government tried to face up to the economic effects of the Great Depression. This user created a new discussion thread just to express their own memories as a witness of the past. They wrote:

(Added: Dad and Mom told us children stories about when the government (President FDR; in order to prop up food prices ordered) kerosene poured on potatoes then dumped shiploads into the ocean to prevent them from being eaten.)<sup>85</sup>

Though the comment does not make any historical sense, it shows that for many users Wikipedia represents a site where they can place their memories with the aim of making these memories part of the broader historical narrative. Wikipedia users appear to be “touched by history,” as Alison Landsberg has smartly put it, or “moved by the past,” as Eelco Runia has pointed out. Thus, Wikipedians try to examine and re-examine their own personal stories in relation to how a historical event is represented in the corresponding main article.<sup>86</sup> Often, as in this case, the comments do not receive any response, so the main article does not change. However, they offer insight into how users perceive the past and actively engage with it in order to produce historical knowledge.

In this way, the “talk pages” of Wikipedia do not only constitute an arena for editing battles about how to reconstruct a historical event but also – as Robert Wolff has argued – “sites of memory,” in which users place their memories about the past.<sup>87</sup> Users’ memories can challenge or confirm the representation of history in a main article. They can be historically accurate or not. They can influence how the past is represented in the main articles, but they can also remain only in the “talk pages”. So, why do Wikipedia users share their personal memories about the past? In his famous article on history and memory, Pierre Nora refers to the different kinds of memories that exist and shape our relation to history. One of them is the “duty-memory”. He writes: “The atomization of a general memory into a private one has

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 107. For more details on the concept of “postmemory,” see Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After The Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>85</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 6,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_6](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_6)

<sup>86</sup> Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 10; Runia, *Moved by the Past*, xii–xiv.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Wolff borrows the concept “sites of memory” from the famous work of Pierre Nora: see Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire,” 7–24; Robert S. Wolff, “The Historian’s Craft, Popular Memory, and Wikipedia,” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, 66, which is cited in Valatsou, *Ανάδυση νέων μνημονικών τόπων στο διαδίκτυο*.



given the obligation to remember a power of internal coercion. It gives everyone the necessity to remember and to protect the trappings of identity; when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means”.<sup>88</sup> Nora’s “duty-memory” offers a great explanation as to why Wikipedia users share their memories about a historical event on the “talk pages”. There is an internal need to prevent specific aspects of the past from falling into oblivion. As the literature scholar, Andreas Huyssen, has argued, memory works as a “bulwark against obsolescence and disappearance” caused by the speed of age.<sup>89</sup> For Wikipedians, sharing their memories signifies a form of intervention in the past. The past appears reversible, as editors can change its representation on Wikipedia.

The media scholar, Christian Pentzold, has also studied Wikipedia as a “global memory place”.<sup>90</sup> For Pentzold, Wikipedia is a “global memory place,” where users can present and debate divergent points of view and produce a common knowledge that constitutes to the formation of collective memory.<sup>91</sup> As he writes, Wikipedia becomes “a place where memorable elements are negotiated, a place of the discursive fabrication of memory”.<sup>92</sup> Based on the concept of “communicative memory” and “collective memory,” Pentzold argued that Wikipedia’s “talk pages” work as the “floating gap,” between “fluid communicative and static collective memory” where different pages are formed.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, in the “talk pages” there is a construction of communicative recollections while in the articles a transition to forms of “cultural memory” takes place.<sup>94</sup> This is obvious in the examples mentioned above; however, as I will show, it does not only characterize the page relating to the Great Depression, but also those concerning other historical events.

Of course, Wikipedia is not only a site where people can place their memories and share their personal experiences. Wikipedia editors often look to historical scholarship; they read academic books and papers in order to make sense of

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88 Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire,” 16.

89 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Past: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 23, which is cited in Haris Exertzoglou, *Δημόσια Ιστορία. Μια εισαγωγή* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις του Εικοστού Πρώτου, 2020), 117.

90 Christian Pentzold, “Fixing the floating gap: The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia as a global memory place,” *Memory Studies* 2, no. 2 (May 2009): 255–72. For Wikipedia as a memory place see also Jahna Ottenbacher, “Our News, Their Events: A Comparison of Archived Current Events on English and Greek Wikipedia,” in *Global Wikipedia: International and Cross-Cultural Issues in Online Collaboration*, 49–67.

91 Pentzold, “Fixing the floating gap,” 263.

92 *Ibid.*, 264.

93 *Ibid.*

94 *Ibid.*

what happened in the past and to produce historical knowledge. In 2013, a debate about when the Great Depression actually started appeared in the discussion pages on Wikipedia.

In August 2013, the user “Tfirey” edited the section entitled “Start of the Great Depression” within the main article, writing that even though the US stock prices fell on October 29, 1929, the Great Depression had started earlier in the summer of 1929.<sup>95</sup> This edit, however, lasted only a few hours, as the user “Binksternet,” a very active editor of articles related to history, changed the sentence to read: “Economic historians usually attribute the start of the Great Depression to the sudden devastating collapse of US stock market prices on October 29, 1929, known as Black Tuesday; some dispute this conclusion, and see the stock crash as a symptom, rather than a cause, of the Great Depression”.<sup>96</sup> Several editing debates then took place between “Tfirey” and “Binksternet” over the next few days and the debate moved to the “talk page” of the article.

To prove that their argument about the start of the Great Depression was correct and based on reliable sources, the user “Binksternet” made an extensive discussion post, in which they mentioned when the encyclopedia Britannica places the start of the Great Depression and what several academics, experts in economic history and economics, such as Erich Rauchway, Hamilton Cravens, Robert S. McElvaine, John Kenneth Galbraith, Dietmar Rothermund, Nicholas Crafts, have argued about the topic.<sup>97</sup> Thus, “Binksternet” concluded:

I hold that general mainstream thought accepts the Wall Street Crash of 1929 as the psychological turning point which signaled the end of the Roaring 20s and start of the Great Depression.<sup>98</sup>

The user “Rjensen” also intervened in the discussion, writing:

I agree with Binksternet. The NBER series says that the HIGH POINT was in August 1929, with September and October indices slightly lower. That slight decline is not enough for a historian to date the GREAT depression. Something much more powerful was needed and

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<sup>95</sup> For the version of the article during that time, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=569738663#Start\\_of\\_the\\_Great\\_Depression](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=569738663#Start_of_the_Great_Depression)

<sup>96</sup> For the profile of the user “Binksternet,” see “User:Binksternet,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Binksternet> For that version of the article, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=569764628#Start\\_of\\_the\\_Great\\_Depression](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=569764628#Start_of_the_Great_Depression)

<sup>97</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 5,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_5](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_5)

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

the great majority of experts point to the stock market crash in October. Note that the slight slippage found in data that NBER later compiled was invisible at the time but the stock market was news worldwide and immediately affected calculations and confidence about the future.<sup>99</sup>

However, “Tfirey” then expressed their disagreement with this theory, arguing:

Why do their [sic] have to be ideological crazies who troll on Wikipedia? Look, recessions start at declines from peaks– it’s like car crashes, that start immediately following the last moment that there WASN’T an impact, not when the driver psychologically felt that he was in a crash. [ . . . ] The official authority on US recessions dates the recession as starting in August. Output began declining in August. That’s why economists consider the recession to have started in August. My entry notes the difference between what popular perception is and what economists say; your reverted version claims economists believe what the popular notion is, even though that’s obviously false and your own quotes indicate that’s false.

Still, you know what? Stay with your crazy little false story. Hey, what’s misleading the public? Personally, I don’t have the time or inclination to fight little ideological crazies.<sup>100</sup>

Both “Binksternet” and “Rjsensen” responded to this comment by explaining their interpretation of the academic works they had previously mentioned above (Figure 6).

Imagine a situation in which an agreed-upon peak indicator hit its top point several years before a depression, then generally leveled off at a comfortably profitable place for many months before starting a big slide downward. In this hypothetical situation, that top point would not be considered the start of a depression, because following the top point was many months of good economic times. Also, after the downward slide hits bottom and begins to trend upward, people would still be experiencing difficult times, so a depression does not stop the moment the bottom is reached. This shows the fallacy of dating the Great Depression from only this or that economic indicator, and these factors are argued by economists. The Great Depression is larger than that; it is made up of many economic and also psychological factors. [Binksternet \(talk\) 21:06, 29 August 2013 \(UTC\)](#)

Binksternet says it well. The “car crash” that Tfirey is concerned with happened in late October 1929 when a lot of metal got bent out of shape....not in September when the first skid marks appeared [Rjsensen \(talk\) 01:04, 30 August 2013 \(UTC\)](#)

**Figure 6:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Depression#Start](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression#Start).

The discussion ended at this point, and the revised sentence “Binksternet” had added remained in the article. Even the current version of the article includes that sentence in the section entitled “Start of the Great Depression”.<sup>101</sup> The reliability of the sources that “Binksternet” cited had enabled them to make the appropriate edits in the article.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Depression#Start](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression#Start)

Engagement with academic scholarship and secondary sources characterizes the construction of the Great Depression article. In September 2015, a similar discussion to the above took place, this time focusing on whether a particular section of the article should be included or not. Specifically, the article included (and continues to include) a section on the role of women during the Great Depression.<sup>102</sup> The user “DrVentureWasRight” disagreed with the existence of a separate section on women and tried to change the article by marking this section as inappropriate for an encyclopedic entry.<sup>103</sup> A few days later, this user wrote on the “talk page”:

This section seems to be really out of place. We don't really talk about the effects on any specific group or subgroup. I really reads [sic] like someone copied it out of a high school research paper. I recommend removing it from this page, although it might find a place on one of the country specific Great Depression pages.<sup>104</sup>

The user recommended the removal of the section, which provoked a strong reaction from other involved editors. The editor “Rjensen” made the following comment, citing several academic works that have engaged with the experiences of women during the Great Depression (Figure 7).

Who is this "we" that does not want to talk about women?? Obviously some narrow economist who is unaware of the wealth of reliable sources on the great depression. Fact is the RS in many fields are publishing books and articles and chapters dealing with the experience of women in the Great Depression. In simple economic terms, since the job market was gender stratified, the employment situation for women was entirely different than for men. Perhaps the critic does not think that men should be studied either? or poor people? Are the political implications allowed to be mentioned, about the social and intellectual dimensions? Movies? Family roles? Fertility? Try browsing: 1) "An Old Order Is Passing: The Rise of Applied Learning in University-Based Teacher Education during the Great Depression" D D'Amico - *History of Education Quarterly* 2015 2) "Population, Politics, and Unemployment Policy in the Great Depression" by M Cohen - *Social Science History*, 2014; 3) "The effects of the great recession on family structure and fertility" by A Cherlin, E Cumberworth, SP Morgan *The ANNALS* 2013 4) *Mothers in the fatherland: Women, the family and Nazi politics* by C Koonz - 2013 5) *The little girl who fought the great depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America* by JF Kasson - 2014 -6) "Lessons from history: Surviving old age during The Great Depression in the United States" by SH Matthews, RE Dunkle - *Journal of aging studies* 2013 7) "Banking crises and mortality during the Great Depression: evidence from US urban populations, 1929–1937" D Stuckler, C Meissner, P Fishback, (2012) 8) *To Work and to Wed Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* by L Scharf - 1980; 9) "American Religion and the Great Depression" J Butler *Church History*, 2011; 10) "Women's work and economic crisis: some lessons of the Great Depression" by R Milkman - *Review of Radical Political Economics* 1976 - 11) "Surviving Tough Times: Saskatchewan Women Teachers in the Great Depression" by J Corman, C Ennsler - *Saskatchewan History*, 2012 etc etc. Rjensen (talk) 23:56, 26 September 2015 (UTC)

**Figure 7:** Screenshot of comment, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_6](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_6).

In this extensive comment, “Rjensen” references several academic works to make it clear that this topic has been examined by historical scholarship, and, as such,

<sup>102</sup> For the version of the page during that time, see “Great Depression,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=680317484#Role\\_of\\_women](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=680317484#Role_of_women)

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 6”.

is worth including in the main article on the Great Depression. “DrVentureWas-Right” replied:

We is [sic] the Wikipedia community. Now, I didn’t say we shouldn’t talk about women. I said that it was tonally [sic] out of place in this article. We could have a section on the effects of various groups in the depression, but I suspect that would be highly dependent upon country and culture. We could also branch it off in to it’s [sic] own page entirely. That could work, but there really isn’t enough material here to make a good page. If you’re interested in adding in more detail [sic] then making a page like “Effects on Women in the Great Depression” could work well.<sup>105</sup>

“Rjensen” then responded to that comment:

The GD is important because of its impact on people. These people are all males?? I think not. Wiki reports what the RS say about the GD. The material is from an advanced scholarly study.<sup>106</sup>

The debate ended at this point. A few years later, the user “Rod57” expressed their agreement with the removal of the section; however, no editor responded to “Rod57” and the section on the role of women remains in the article even now.<sup>107</sup> Wikipedia users contribute to the online encyclopedia not only to place their memories or to write their own thoughts about history. They actively engage with academic scholarship, reading books and papers that are related to the topic they analyze. As René König argues, Wikipedia participants become experts through their contributions to the encyclopedia.<sup>108</sup> On Wikipedia, expertise and interest in a topic are strongly connected.<sup>109</sup> Wikipedia users start conducting research on a topic and become experts on it. By conducting research on a topic not covered in the article, such as the role of women in the Great Depression, the Wikipedia editors contribute to the growth and development of Wikipedia.

By following the academic developments of historical scholarship, Wikipedia editors try to keep Wikipedia’s contents updated and often make them more inclusive. Several studies have correctly criticized Wikipedia for its gender gap both in terms of contents and participants.<sup>110</sup> The example above does not chal-

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105 Ibid.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

108 König, “Wikipedia. Between lay participation and elite knowledge representation,” 164.

109 Ibid.

110 Jemelniak, *Common Knowledge?*; Fichman and Hara, ed., *Global Wikipedia: International and Cross-Cultural Issues in Online Collaboration*; Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*; Julia Adams and Hannah Bruckner, “Wikipedia, Sociology, and the Promise of Big Data,” *Big Data & Society* (July–December 2015): 1–5; Elizabeth Losh, Jacqueline Wernimont, Laura Wexler, Hong-

lunge these studies but shows that academic scholarship plays a significant role in how Wikipedia users produce historical knowledge about the Great Depression. To better understand this example, we should place it within the broader framework of how Wikipedia manages to face critique and ultimately become more diverse.<sup>111</sup> As Heather Ford has argued, Wikipedia should be seen as a space where battles over gender, language, and ideology take place.<sup>112</sup>

However, the efforts of Wikipedians to keep up with academic developments and Wikipedia's guidelines is not a simple process, it often creates intensive discussions and editing debates. The nature of the sources that Wikipedia editors engage with and accept constitutes a common topic for arguments and debates. Wikipedia users critically examine the sources that they use to develop a historical article. Also, their perceptions of the sources reveal their broader political and ideological beliefs. In December 2016, the user "Crosswords" edited the main article on the Great Depression and, more specifically, the section entitled "Economic indicators".<sup>113</sup> In that section, there was a table that showed the change in industrial production, wholesale prices, foreign trade, and unemployment for the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany from 1929 to 1932 (Figure 8).<sup>114</sup> However, the user "Crosswords," who wanted to show that the Soviet Union did not only suffer from the Great Depression but managed to increase its production, added the Soviet Union to the table by mentioning an increase of 85 percent in their industrial production (Figure 9).<sup>115</sup> The data that the user "Crosswords" used was taken from the website "www.marx2mao.com".<sup>116</sup> The next day, the users "Sagecandor" and "North Shoreman" reverted this edit, challenged the reliability of the source, and marked it as a primary source, which is not accepted in Wikipedia articles.

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An Wu, "Putting the Human Back into the Digital Humanities: Feminism, Generosity, and Mess" *Debates in the Digital Humanities*; Julia Adams, Hannah Bruckner, and Cambria Naslund, "Who Counts as a Notable Sociologist on Wikipedia? Gender, Race, and the 'Professor Test'," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5 (2019): 1–14.

111 On the efforts of Wikipedia to improve its coverage of topics related to art, feminism, and gender, see Evans, et al., "What We Talk About When We Talk About Community," in *Wikipedia @20*.

112 Ford, "Rise of the Underdog".

113 For the revision history of the page during that time, see "Great Depression: Revision history," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&offset=&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&offset=&limit=500&action=history)

114 For the version of the page, as it was before the edit, see "Great Depression," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=752041071#Economic\\_indicators](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=752041071#Economic_indicators) Even now, the section has the same form.

115 For the page after the edit, see "Great Depression," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=753250524#cite\\_note-19](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=753250524#cite_note-19)

116 *Ibid.*

Change in economic indicators 1929–32<sup>[18]</sup>

	United States	Great Britain	France	Germany
Industrial production	−46%	−23%	−24%	−41%
Wholesale prices	−32%	−33%	−34%	−29%
Foreign trade	−70%	−60%	−54%	−61%
Unemployment	+607%	+129%	+214%	+232%

**Figure 8:** Screenshot of table, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=752041071#Economic\\_indicators](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=752041071#Economic_indicators).Change in economic indicators 1929–32<sup>[18][19]</sup>

	United States	Great Britain	France	Germany	Soviet Union
Industrial production	−46%	−23%	−24%	−41%	+85%
Wholesale prices	−32%	−33%	−34%	−29%	
Foreign trade	−70%	−60%	−54%	−61%	
Unemployment	+607%	+129%	+214%	+232%	

**Figure 9:** Screenshot of table, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\\_Depression&oldid=752041071#Economic\\_indicators](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great_Depression&oldid=752041071#Economic_indicators).

After several exchanges between the two sides, these users then created a discussion thread on the “talk page” of the Great Depression article in order to continue the debate.<sup>117</sup> There, “Sagecandor” wrote:

Appears to be a primary source to some website: “www.marx2mao.com”. Further, appears to be same book as this [7], writings by Joseph Stalin. Is this really a reliable source for the Great Depression? Could this be an attempt at a spam link to: “www.marx2mao.com”? Do we really want to rely on WP:PRIMARY reference links like this instead of focusing on WP:SECONDARY sources for this article?<sup>118</sup>

For “Sagecandor,” the website “www.marx2mao.com” was not a reliable source of reference, as it was not only a primary source but referred to the writings of Joseph Stalin, a controversial historical figure. Thus, for “Sagecandor,” the website was a potentially biased source of historical knowledge that should not be used in the article.

Another editor, the user “North Shoreman,” an avid editor of historical articles and a participant in WikiProject United States History and WikiProject Military History, commented:

<sup>117</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 5”.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

I can't see any value in the additional source. There is no page reference and it is only placed after a section head. The person wanting to add it needs to come here and explain what info the source is supporting and where in the source that info is.<sup>119</sup>

A brief dialogue between the editors then followed this comment (Figure 10).<sup>120</sup>

Thank you very much for your participation here on the talk page, [North Shoreman](#). I agree with you it is just a bare link. No book title, missing author, missing page number, missing year of publication, missing any explanation whatsoever for why the asserted cite backs up that info and fails [verification](#) to allow future users to verify it. What step to take next regarding this? [Sagecandor](#) (talk) 03:07, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

I've deleted it and invited the originator to come here for discussion. At this point he/she appears to be approaching a 3RR violation. [Tom](#) ([North Shoreman](#)) (talk) 03:09, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

Okay I think I may have reverted twice myself and so that is yet another good reason to have talk page participation and why I'm refraining from making more edits at this point in time to this page. [Sagecandor](#) (talk) 03:13, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

Stalin faked a lot of numbers. 1) Bullard 2000: "There is no person in authority, from Stalin down, who would not sign a hundred pages of false statistics and think nothing of it." 2) Skillen (2016) "Real facts, honest statistics, disappeared." 3) Marco Carynnyk, et al (1988) "Stalin announced at the Seventeenth Party Congress in January 1934 that 89.8 million tons of grain had been produced in 1933. The State Statistical Commission has recently calculated that the true figure was 68.4 million tons." [Rjensen](#) (talk) 04:18, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

Wow. That is very revealing information from those sources. Thank you ! [Sagecandor](#) (talk) 04:23, 8 December 2016 (UTC)

**Figure 10:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_5](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_5).

As shown above, the user “Rjensen” joined in the debate, arguing that a work written by Joseph Stalin could not be taken as reliable, as he “faked a lot of numbers” to misrepresent the Soviet Union’s economic situation.<sup>121</sup> This comment prompted a reaction from the user “Crosswords,” who had originally made the edit and added the Soviet Union to the table. The subsequent exchange between “Crosswords” and “Rjensen” can be seen here (Figure 11).<sup>122</sup>

yet you cant back up your own claims Rjensen with these accusations against Stalin. Fact is that the Soviet Union wasnt effected by the global financial crisis and under his lead the Soviet Union became an industrialized nation this is common knowledge that you can find everywhere in the west.--[Crosswords](#) (talk) 01:56, 12 December 2016 (UTC)

even the Russians today agree Stalin faked a lot of numbers. [Rjensen](#) (talk) 02:12, 12 December 2016 (UTC)

**Figure 11:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great\\_Depression/Archive\\_5](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Great_Depression/Archive_5).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. For the profile page of this user, see “User:North Shoreman,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:North\\_Shoreman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:North_Shoreman)

<sup>120</sup> “Talk:Great Depression/Archive 5”.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.



The discussion ended at this point, as the involved editors had reached a consensus. The article on the Great Depression did not change anymore, as the users reverted the edit and erased the contribution of “Crosswords”. The “sociotechnical” framework of Wikipedia with its specific guidelines and policies determines the agency and the editing activity of Wikipedians.<sup>123</sup> As Sabine Niederer and José van Dijck have argued, it is not only the human agency but “the technological tools and managerial dynamics that structure and maintain its contents”.<sup>124</sup>

As shown above, different types of knowledge blend together on the talk pages. Personal memories, theory, historiography, guidelines, and policies characterize Wikipedians’ engagement with history and, in this case, came to define the construction of the Great Depression article. Academic scholarship and compliance with Wikipedia’s protocols and guidelines, however, also play an important role in this process. Personal experiences are limited and do not necessarily come from the Wikipedia editors themselves but from their ancestors (grandparents). These place out in the background of the article, on the “talk pages,” and do not determine the contents of the main article. As Eelco Runia has written, for a generation that has not participated in a traumatic event, commemoration or – in this case – writing about it means to deal with the absence of memories.<sup>125</sup> Wikipedians approach and perceive the Great Depression as a distant past, a “zamani,” which does not belong to the space of experience but to the space of historical scholarship. For this reason, the engagement with academic developments marks the interaction of Wikipedians with the history of the Great Depression.

## The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

The Wikipedia page about the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was created in 2004 as a merge of two separate articles on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>126</sup> The page has received 8,582 edits from 2004 to January 2001 and has 573,375 views in the last sixty days.<sup>127</sup> The “talk page” mentions that the contents of the

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<sup>123</sup> For the term “sociotechnical” system, as it relates to Wikipedia, see Niederer and van Dijck, “Wisdom of the Crowd or technicity of the content?” For “social interface,” see also Jonah Bossewitch, John Frankfurt, and Alexander Sherman, with Robin D. G. Kelley, “Wiki Justice, Social Ergonomics, and Ethical Collaborations,” in *Wiki Writing*, 52.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 1368.

<sup>125</sup> Runia, *Moved by the Past*, 12.

<sup>126</sup> Regarding the statistics of the page, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – page statistics,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki)

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

article are controversial, so some contents may be in dispute.<sup>128</sup> The article has been rated as a “warfare good article” and has been listed as a “level-4 vital article in History”.<sup>129</sup> The article has appeared in the top 25 reports two times, which means that the article was among the 25 most popular articles of the week.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, it is a “featured topic,” namely a good quality collection of inter-related articles, in the History of the Manhattan Project series.<sup>131</sup> Several WikiProjects have contributed to the development of the page, such as the WikiProject Japan, the WikiProject Military History, the WikiProject United States History, the WikiProject United States, the WikiProject Death, and the WikiProject Environment.<sup>132</sup> In all these projects, the article is rated as an A-Class article.<sup>133</sup> The article had also been the subject of an academic course assignment supported by the Wiki Education Foundation.<sup>134</sup> The course was titled “Human Rights in Global History” and was taught at the Xavier University of Louisiana in the fall semester of 2018.<sup>135</sup> This collaboration between Wikipedia and academia constitutes a broader effort by Wikipedia to improve its contents and deal with the issues of equity, policy, and the lack of new Wikipedians.<sup>136</sup>

The main article includes multiple sections on the background information of the bombings, the preparations, analysis of the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the surrender of Japan and the subsequent occupation, post-attack causali-

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**128** “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki)

**129** *Ibid.*

**130** *Ibid.* For the top 25 report, see “Wikipedia:Top 25 Report,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Top\\_25\\_Report](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Top_25_Report)

**131** “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki”. For the featured topics of the History of the Manhattan Project, see “Wikipedia:Featured topics/History of the Manhattan Project,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured\\_topics/History\\_of\\_the\\_Manhattan\\_Project](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_topics/History_of_the_Manhattan_Project) For what is a “featured topic,” see “Wikipedia:Featured topics,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured\\_topics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_topics)

**132** “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki”.

**133** *Ibid.*

**134** *Ibid.*

**135** For the course, see “Wikipedia:Wiki Ed/Xavier University of Louisiana/Human Rights in Global History -02 (Fall 2018),” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wiki\\_Ed/Xavier\\_University\\_of\\_Louisiana/Human\\_Rights\\_in\\_Global\\_History\\_-02\\_\(Fall\\_2018\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wiki_Ed/Xavier_University_of_Louisiana/Human_Rights_in_Global_History_-02_(Fall_2018))

**136** For the collaboration between Wikipedia and universities, see Ramjohn and Davis, “Equity, Policy, and Newcomers,” in *Wikipedia @20*; Cummings, “The First Twenty Years of Teaching with Wikipedia,” in *Wikipedia @20*.

ties, memorials, debates over the bombings, etc.<sup>137</sup> The page consists of visual items, such as maps, documents, US army propaganda posters, leaflets dropped on Japan, and images that depict air raids on Japan and the casualties of the bombings, their subsequent effects on both people and the environment, and the memorials in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>138</sup> Apart from the images, it is interesting that the page also includes three short pieces of footage, which show the Hiroshima ruins and survivors with burns and scars.<sup>139</sup> Another significant element of the page is a voice recording of President Harry S. Truman, in which he talks about the bombings of Hiroshima and describes it as a “military base”.<sup>140</sup> All these textual, visual, and audio elements offer high quality coverage of the bombings according to Wikipedia’s assessment criteria.

By looking behind the curtain, we can see that extensive debates have taken place between Wikipedia editors in relation to the main article. Several discussions have appeared on the “talk page” since the article’s initial creation. These discussions about the atomic bombings are longer than those related to the Great Depression. Here, I will focus only on the most significant and extensive discussions, as they led to more and more users taking part and contributing to the development of the page.

The first and the most important topic, with which the involved editors engaged, was the broader character of the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many participants were trying to make sense whether the atomic bombs were crimes against humanity or not, as Japan was ready to surrender, or if the bombings were terrorist attacks against the Japanese people, or genocides or massacres, or if they ultimately saved thousands of lives by ending the war. All these different points of view caused debates and conflicts between the participants.

Since the creation of the page in June 2004, the article has included a section named “Debate over the decision to drop the bombs,” in which different views on the atomic bombs have been analyzed.<sup>141</sup> The section mentions that for some historians the bombs prompted the surrender of Japan, while for others, Japan was already defeated, so the bombings were not necessary, or Japan was willing to surrender but the US aimed for unconditional surrender, or the US had hidden

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137 “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki)

138 *Ibid.*

139 *Ibid.*

140 *Ibid.*

141 For the version of the page during that time, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&oldid=4050940](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=4050940)

motives in dropping the bombs.<sup>142</sup> That version of the page was created mainly by the editor “Iseeaboar”.<sup>143</sup> In July 2004, some users created a discussion thread on the “talk page” and started to discuss whether the bombings led to the surrender of Japan or if Japan would have surrendered even without the bombings.<sup>144</sup> The discussion started when a user claimed that there is a debate between historians on whether the second atomic bombing should have been dropped.<sup>145</sup> Specifically, an anonymous user cited a link from the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, which is no longer available, to show this debate between historians about the atomic bombs.<sup>146</sup> That comment triggered the participation of other users in the discussion, who shared their own understandings of this historical event. The users mentioned different theories about the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and discussed potential “what ifs” to better understand what had happened in the past.<sup>147</sup>

However, their comments did not aim to provoke any substantial editing of the article, as the article already included a section on the existing debates about the atomic bombings. The users just felt the need to discuss all the possible scenarios by conducting their own secondary research and finding secondary sources to support their arguments. The involved users shared their own beliefs about why the US dropped the atomic bombs. Their goal was not to impose their own findings and explanations on other users. Instead, they aimed to develop the section on the debates further by providing a more detailed analysis with more sources.<sup>148</sup> In the next days, the users added more details to the section by adding several sources that supported their different theories.<sup>149</sup> Gradually, the discus-

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142 Ibid.

143 For the revision history of the page, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&dir=prev&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&dir=prev&limit=500&action=history)

144 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 1,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_1)

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid. The link was, most likely, to the following and refers to a review of the book, *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*, written by Dennis D. Wainstock, [https://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/schrag/wiki/index.php?title=The\\_Decision\\_to\\_Drop\\_the\\_Atomic\\_Bomb](https://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/schrag/wiki/index.php?title=The_Decision_to_Drop_the_Atomic_Bomb)

147 For the “what if” in history, see Richard J. Evans, *Altered Pasts. Counterfactuals in History* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013); Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York, NY: Books Groups, 1999).

148 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 1”.

149 See the related edits in the revision history of the page: “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/>

sion contributed to the overall development of the section, as the editors created two separate subsections, “Opposition to use of atomic bombs” and “Support for use of atomic bombs”.<sup>150</sup> The two subsections included extensive lists of those figures who supported or opposed the use of atomic bombs with specific references to their works and arguments. In the subsection “Opposition to use of atomic bombs,” there was a reference to the argument that the atomic bombs have been considered as “crimes against humanity,” “war crimes,” and “acts of terrorism”.<sup>151</sup>

Some months later, in January 2005, a new discussion thread appeared in which some users expressed their disagreement with the statement that the atomic bombings were “acts of terrorism”.<sup>152</sup> Specifically, the user “Philip Baird Shearer” wrote:

and some people think that “it’s turtles all the way down”. This is a classic weasel worded sentence. Is there any agreement that in a declared war during the middle of the 20th century that states could commit terrorism against the enemy, because any military action against an enemy could be construed to be an attempt to terrorise [sic] them. Was there any legal definition in this area as to degree or type of action as to what constituted state terrorism in 1945?<sup>153</sup>

The comment of this user prompted a reaction from another user, “Silverback,” who argued:

If there was a definition of terrorism during war at the time, the Atomic bombings would fit it. The intent was to end the war through terror. It wasn’t the military damage done at Hiroshima and Nagasaki that ended the war. It was terrorism and a war crime and justified in the minds of those that ordered it, and probably even justifiable today although lack of respect for international law leaves it unamended to accomodate [sic] for such justifiable terror. Nagasaki though is more difficult to justify.<sup>154</sup>

Another user then got involved in the discussion and expressed their strong opposition to the use of the word “terrorism” to describe the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This user, “Noel,” wrote:

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index.php?title=Atomic\_bombings\_of\_Hiroshima\_and\_Nagasaki&dir=prev&limit=500&action=history

<sup>150</sup> See, for example, that version of the page, “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&oldid=7153551#Debate\\_over\\_the\\_decision\\_to\\_drop\\_the\\_bombs](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=7153551#Debate_over_the_decision_to_drop_the_bombs)

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 3,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_3)

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

The goal of terrorism (to the extent it has one – it's often just plain nihilism) is to induce psychological changes in the target population. That was not, AFAIK, the main goal of the atomic bombings, as much as they had any explicitly stated goals, other than furthering the surrender of Japan. I just had a 30-minute look through my reasonably extensive collection of books on the subject of the bombings, but I can't find anything on what explicit goals the US had – can you point to any?<sup>155</sup>

### The debate continued (Figure 12).

A willingness to "surrender" is quite a psychological change in this particular target population. It destroyed any heroic visions of resistance to a long siege of their island, they weren't to be allowed that honor, they were to be incinerated like rats by a flame thrower. An offshore demonstration would have been spectacular, but might have left doubt about our moral willingness to use it. The Japanese were not afraid of fire bombings anymore, they thought their fire breaks prepared them to survive them. Perhaps the second bomb was to create in their minds the impression that they might not have the time to formulate a strategy for continuing the resistance against this weapon. Ashes can't think.--  
Silverback 00:37, 7 Jan 2005 (UTC)

But it wasn't the population as a whole who were resisting surrender; rather, it was mostly the Army.

Your comments, while certainly colourful, don't answer my question: other than (overall) furthering the surrender of Japan, do you know of any documentation of exactly what the explicit goals of the US were in dropping the bombs? i.e. any details on how they hoped the bombings would accomplish this goal? I was rather surprised that I couldn't find anything on this point, despite a search. One would think that people getting ready to deploy a new weapon would have considered what it would bring them. Noel (talk) 01:19, 7 Jan 2005 (UTC)

Well, I have heard military targets cited retrospectively. The population as a whole was preparing to resist attack, with mobilized women and children training to kill with farm implements if need be. U.S. leadership definitely expected the dropping of the bombs would lead to surrender, it is a safe assumption that they did not think they had completely destroyed any capability that Japan had to resist. The dropping of the bombs was terrorism and the mass-murder of innocents, and quite possibly justified by the usual means, net lives saved. Frankly, as someone (now reformed), responsible for the taking of far more innocent lives myself, I think the atomic and fire bombings are overemphasized. I have knowingly voted for Senators, representatives and a president who supported the Food and Drug Administration, so I bear personal responsibility, undiminished by the anonymity of the secret ballot, for the million plus innocent lives lost by delaying access to life saving drugs such as beta blockers and clot busters (i.e. TPA and streptokinase). I've long viewed myself and most others as mass-murderers. By the time the leadership was making the decision to drop these bombs, they were already responsible for the deaths of over 500,000 innocent american civilians who were conscripted, frankly, what are a few "foreigners" after that? I doubt there was much moral hand wringing, and things have arguably turned out for the best, unless one considers the moral outrage at the use of atomic weapons may have contributed to the failure to use them to bring a pre-emptive end to the cold war and the 10s of millions of lives it cost.--  
Silverback 08:18, 7 Jan 2005 (UTC)

**Figure 12:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_3).

As the discussion comments reveal, even though the article follows the policy of NPOV and refers to the theory that views the atomic bombings as terrorist attacks, users intervened in the discussion to share their own historical understandings and their beliefs about what had happened. These users made historical arguments to enable their own perceptions of the past to become part of the main article. For this reason, the discussions about the atomic bombings and the concept of terrorism continued, with various users citing legal precedents from the period, the Nuremberg charter, the Hague Convention, the resolutions of the League of Nations, and the General Assembly of the United Nations, to support

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155 Ibid.

their arguments and persuade the involved editors to change the main article.<sup>156</sup> These discussions and debates between the users continued over several days; however, they did not lead to any substantial editing changes being made to the article itself.

The policy of NPOV motivates Wikipedia users to actively write about history and cover all the possible points of view about a historical event. This idea is confirmed on the “talk page” of that article. Users try to shed light on all possible aspects of the past and provide a balanced historical narrative about a traumatic event. However, to integrate all historical points of view, users should also seek out secondary sources, make reliable historical arguments, and try to convince other editors that their points are worth including in the main article.

A few months later, in August 2005, a similar discussion appeared on the “talk page,” when the user “Uncle Ed,” a regular contributor to Wikipedia, who has also served as a Mediator, an Admin, and a Bureaucrat on Wikipedia, cited an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, which argued that, as a Japanese attack was expected, the dropping of the atomic bombs resulted in the least possible number of casualties that any attack could have had.<sup>157</sup> The user shared that argument with the aim of making it part of the relevant section on the theories in support of the atomic bombings. As the user clarified, they did not mean to suggest that the main article should adopt that theory, but rather that it should incorporate it as an existing point of view.

That comment provoked several other responses, most of which found the idea that a Japanese invasion was expected to be extremely problematic (Figure 13).<sup>158</sup> As shown above, the user challenged the idea that an invasion of Japan was “expected” and, therefore, that the atomic bombings aimed to prevent the attack from taking place. This debate between the users about the “expected” character of a potential Japanese invasion made the user “Taku,” a user of Japanese ancestry and with a Ph.D. in Mathematics, as mentioned on their profile page, and one of the top editors of the page, edit the introduction to the article.<sup>159</sup> In the first paragraph,

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156 Ibid. See also the following sections: “Legal Precedents,” “Discussion of legal precedents,” “Wanton destruction,” “A question about Hague IV,” and “International Court of Justice”.

157 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 4,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_4#Imbalanced\\_arguments\\_on\\_justification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_4#Imbalanced_arguments_on_justification) For the profile page of this user, see “User:Ed Poor,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Ed\\_Poor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Ed_Poor)

158 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 4”.

159 For the profile page of this user, see “User:TakuyaMurata,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:TakuyaMurata> For the top editors of the page, see “Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki)

We have some difficulty with a source that says this outcome "was expected". Expected by whom? I have no problem with reporting a notable opinion to that effect, but use of the passive voice, as in the quotation from the *Wall Street Journal*, would be dubious. [JamesMLane](#) 16:44, 5 August 2005 (UTC)

Expected by pretty much everybody with experience fighting the Japanese, I should think. There hadn't been a case when they *hadn't* fought to (virtually) the last man, and often ending with a mass suicide. But the invasion of Kyushu was no longer the likely alternative to using the bomb:

"Even with the full ration of caution that any historian should apply anytime he ventures comments on paths history did not take, in this instance it is now clear that the long-held belief that Operation Olympic loomed as a certainty is mistaken. Truman's reluctant endorsement of the Olympic invasion at a meeting in June 1945 was based in key part on the fact that the Joint Chiefs had presented it as their unanimous recommendation. ... But this evidence also shows that the demise of Olympic came not because it was deemed unnecessary, but because it had become unthinkable."*Why Truman Dropped the Bomb?*

—[wwoods](#) 19:09, 5 August 2005 (UTC)

James - see [Operation Downfall](#) (which is a featured article). It contains a rather extensive and very well documented list of casualty projections. →[Raul654](#) 00:35, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

To make the argument Ed's referring to, you need to make two points: That without the bombings, there would have had to be an invasion, and that the invasion, if it had occurred, would have cost many lives. I think "expected by pretty much everybody" is true as to the second point but not the first. There shouldn't be any passage in the article that assumes that the bombings averted an invasion. For example, Ed's phrase about the effect of the bombings "compared to the alternative" assumes that there was only one alternative. [JamesMLane](#) 17:35, 6 August 2005 (UTC)

**Figure 13:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_4#Imbalanced\\_arguments\\_on\\_justification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_4#Imbalanced_arguments_on_justification).

there had been the following statement: “One of the primary reasons given for the use of the bomb was that it would force Japan to surrender unconditionally, and make the planned invasion of Japan unnecessary”.<sup>160</sup> “Taku” removed the words “make the planned invasion of Japan unnecessary”.<sup>161</sup> Another user, “Raul654,” intervened and reverted the edit multiple times.<sup>162</sup> The editing conflict then moved to the discussion page. The user “Taku” explained that they removed this part from the introduction because it was both a controversial and not particularly well-supported argument.<sup>163</sup> “Raul654” agreed with the unexpected character of the bombings and the following exchange between these two users took place (Figure 14).<sup>164</sup>

**160** For the version of the page before the user’s edit, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&oldid=20378464](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=20378464)

**161** For the version of the page after the edit, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&oldid=20378624](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=20378624)

**162** For the revision history of the page during that time, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&dir=prev&offset=20050417113031%7C12433608&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&dir=prev&offset=20050417113031%7C12433608&limit=500&action=history)

**163** “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 4”.

**164** *Ibid.*



Erm, because the stated reasons were "explicitely" to avoid the invasion of Japan. Not mentiong it is a glaring omission. →Raul654 01:17, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Where can I find this explicitly stated reason? I know many people claim that the bomings saved many American soldiers. But that is different from saying (1) the primary reason is to force Japan to surrender and (2) doing so avoids the invasion. We don't have to make a causal connection between (1) and (2). -- Taku 01:26, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Would you care to state a single way in which dropping the atomic bomb to force Japan to surrender is differet from dropping it to avoid the (imminent) invasion? →Raul654 01:30, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Sorry for sounding rude, but I think it is you who have to give us a source. I am just suggesting that at least we wait until you provide one. I do agree with you but it is not necessarily an accepted theory. So we need a source to back that.

For example, one might say, rightly or not, that the invasion was not going to happen anyway so the bombing has nothing to do with the invasion.

Besides this, as I said above, why do we have to venture about the connection between the surrender and the invasion in the intro? Why is making the connection between the surrender and the bombing insufficient? in the way it was done before. --- Taku 01:48, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

*"Stimson's crucial role in the use of the Atomic bombs against Japan began with Truman's accession. The policies and actions that brought a Japanese surrender without an apocalyptic battle in the homeland are Stimson's legacy - in short, the use of the Atomic bomb, which was urged by Stimson, prevented the invasion of Japan. (John Ray Skates, the Invasion of Japan, 236) The point is so obvious that the author does not even state it directly.* →Raul654 01:59, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Also, to answer your 2nd question - because as I said above, not mentioning the impending invasion of Japan when talking about the use of the atomic bombs is a GLARING omission, almost as bad as the version of Adolf Hitler that didn't mention world war II in the introduction. →Raul654 02:01, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

No, no, this is what people are saying that the bombing prevented the invasion *after* World War II. I need an explicit statement as you claimed that states the bombing was going to be used to both (1) force the surrender and (2) avoid the invasion. Also for the second one, I don't think your analogy is right; as we had conflict, the links between the bombing, the surrender and the invasion are not necessarily clear. And I am saying that it would be sensitive for us to avoid the venture on this in intro.

I hate confrontation, but please pay attention to subtleties. The old intro says that the bombing was going to be used for the purpose of forcing the Japanese to surrender. In other words, it does not say it did force the surrender. I agree that, in retrospect, the surrender made the invasion unnecessary but there is a subtle but important difference between the stated reasons for the use of the bombing prior to the actual bombing and what happened afterward. And, in general, as it is a delicate issue why and how the Japanese surrendered, we should stay away from venturing in discussing this issue (Japan's surrender) on the intro of this article. -- Taku 02:07, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

Part of the justification was clearly to stem off an invasion. I think my version, which lists the possibility as well as notes that the bombings were and continue to be controversial.

In any event, you are way out of line with five reverts, claiming consensus when it is clearly you against five different editors. *Knock it off.* →Fastfission 02:31, 6 August 2005 (UTC)

Just for teh record, fastfission's qualified version of the intro is totally fine by me. →Raul654 02:44, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

I don't think the intro is a place to discuss those possibilities and controversies. Also, in wikipedia I don't think we accepts a new change because more people like the change than the others. There had been a debate on intro before, and we had reached some consensus by now; I am saying that you cannot ignore that. -- Taku 02:36, August 6, 2005 (UTC)

**Figure 14:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_4#Imbalanced\\_arguments\\_on\\_justification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_4#Imbalanced_arguments_on_justification).

From this point, the discussion did not continue any further, and the page did not include reference to the “unexpected” invasion of Japan within its introductory paragraph. These examples are typical of how Wikipedia editors engage with secondary sources and adhere to Wikipedia’s policies to make historical arguments and, therefore, to edit the Wikipedia articles appropriately. Wikipedia users do not only use “talk pages” to share their personal thoughts and memories, but to make historical arguments based on secondary sources and Wikipedia guidelines. In addition, the continuous intervention of other users on the “talk pages” makes it clear that Wikipedia articles are never final nor static written products, but are always in a state of constant flux.

The secondary sources, with which Wikipedia users actively engage, do not only include articles, books, and papers but also visual media, such as images and

videos. Wikipedians get involved in discussions and debates about what visual details they should add or remove from any article. In February 2006, the article concerning the atomic bombings contained several images that depicted topics related to the dropping of the bombs, such as the mushroom cloud from the nuclear explosion over Nagasaki, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Canada, a map of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the burns on the victims, destroyed buildings and landscapes, the Nagasaki Peace Park, and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial.<sup>165</sup> However, many users found the existence of so many pictures in the article excessive and brought this matter up on the relevant “talk page”.<sup>166</sup> Specifically, the user “Ten Dead Chickens” or “TDC,” one of the top editors of the article, wrote that “there are way too many pictures in the current article” and suggested reducing them.<sup>167</sup> An anonymous user responded to that comment by adding:

Yes, definitely [sic]. Also, do people REALLY need to see the burns on that victim? Seriously, many schools in my area view this page. That picture (the first one under, “Japanese realization of the bombing”) is just grisly.<sup>168</sup>

As mentioned above, the main article contained a picture that showed a Japanese victim of the atomic bombings with burns on her body.<sup>169</sup> For the anonymous user, that picture did not serve the educational aim of Wikipedia. Their comment made other editors express their own opinions about the existence of these images in the article (Figure 15).

As the discussion above reveals, some users felt that the picture showing the burns should be removed because it is not necessarily educational and is also quite disturbing; but for others the picture’s inclusion was appropriate, as it served to highlight the atrocities of the bombings and their effects on Japanese people. In the end, the picture with the victim remained in the main article, and

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<sup>165</sup> For a version of the page in January 2006, see “Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&oldid=37668033](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=37668033)

<sup>166</sup> “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 6,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_6#Too\\_many\\_pictures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_6#Too_many_pictures)

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> For the image, see “File:Gisei32.jpg,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gisei32.jpg>

Part of learning about atomic warfare is learning about what it can do. Those pictures are educational. We shouldn't censor ourselves. --AaronS 03:38, 16 February 2006 (UTC)

I whole heartedly agree. I think it would be an absolute disservice to the users of Wikipedia and anyone beyond to not educate them on the atrocities of war by showing the effects of nuclear warfare. It can be very easy to disassociate mortality figures on a website from the actual pain and suffering caused as a result of these actions. It's not a game, after all. --User:alexthecheese 13:31, 20 February 2006 (GMT)

Hm. When folks begin to speak of *atrocities* and *educating people*, I catch a hint of propaganda. Personally, I don't have anything against the photographs: they are presumably real, unlike some of the text material. But if their purpose is to *educate people*, well, I wonder about motives. This is not Hyde Park Corner, after all. --Cubdriver 13:50, 20 February 2006 (UTC)

The purpose of an encyclopedia is to educate. There are nowhere near to many pictures. Still, two have been removed, namely two maps that seem very useful, so I suggest putting them back. Dirkvdm 09:00, 21 February 2006 (UTC)

The purpose of an encyclopedia is not to shape opinions, which seems to be the kind of education that interests some contributors here. That said, the more photos the better. I trust the posters applauding photos of injured Hiroshima citizens would likewise endorse photographs of literal atrocities at Nanjing, on the Burma-Thai Death Railroad, and in the Bataan Death March for example. --Cubdriver 19:20, 21 February 2006 (UTC)

Cubdriver, it seems that you're being argumentative for the sake of being argumentative. There's a debate about the pictures in this article, and someone spoke generally about "the atrocities of war" and you go off on a tangent accusing people of spewing propaganda and questioning their motives. Someone else talks about *maps*, and you start throwing Japanese war atrocities into the mix. Why not wait until someone *actually* talks about making a POV change to the article before you start circling the wagons and shooting at POV injuns? KarlBunker 20:38, 21 February 2006 (UTC)

As I say, the more photos the better, but "educating people about the atrocities of war" is not their purpose, even if we make the debatable assumption that the atomic bombings *were* an atrocity. The photo originally under question showed radiation injuries; someone objected to it as distasteful; someone defended it as necessary to educate the lumpenproletariat. No, that's not why the photograph is valuable, and if it's there for that purpose, then it *ought* to come out. The one agenda is as dubious as the other, perhaps more so. --Cubdriver 21:42, 21 February 2006 (UTC)

I certainly agree with most of that. I would only suggest two things: 1) that it doesn't really matter what an editor's motivations are; it's the content that matters, and 2) that someone might use "the atrocities of war" simply to refer to "the really bad things that happen in a war", rather than making any accusation about the legitimacy of a particular act. KarlBunker 01:14, 22 February 2006 (UTC)

The only picture we currently have of any of the victims ([this one](#)) is one which is often reprinted and is not very disturbing at all, relatively speaking (looks like a bad sun burn). Personally I think one could make the argument that there are not *enough* pictures of victims -- most of the pictures of the results of the bombing are of empty cities and make it look as if people were all vaporized instantly, a conception about nuclear war that downplays the actual long-term damage of nuclear warfare (a nice discussion of this by a historian is in Spencer Weart's *Nuclear Fear*, for those interested). But personally I find the other victim pictures *a bit too graphic* for an NPOV encyclopedia article, so I think the current one will have to do. Personally I prefer the *non-false colored* version of the current one (I doubt the color choices are based in any fact), but am not willing to battle back and forth over it. --Fastfission 02:51, 22 February 2006 (UTC)

Anonymous (Yes, same guy as before): Perhaps you could put a warning on those pictures (make them links) and put them under a section with a warning that they may be disturbing?

**Figure 15:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_6#Too\\_many\\_pictures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_6#Too_many_pictures).

the user "Ten Dead Chickens," who had started the discussion thread, removed the pictures depicting the maps of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>170</sup>

Wikipedia users not only collect knowledge from books, papers, articles, and pictures that they have found on the Internet, but also share items, photographs, or the broader historical knowledge they have collected by visiting museums and historical sites. They try to make their personal experiences part of the main articles on Wikipedia. In August 2007, the user "Aude" created a discussion thread to share their experiences from having visited the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Mu-

<sup>170</sup> For the version of the article after the removal of the pictures, see "Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&oldid=38781839](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=38781839)

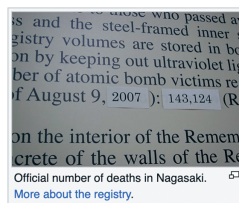
seum and the Nagasaki Peace Park.<sup>171</sup> More specifically, this user wanted to share some photographs that they had taken during their visit to Nagasaki, in order to improve the historical coverage of the article and to add some more details about the atomic bombings. “Aude” made three comments demonstrating their willingness to contribute to Wikipedia (Figure 16).

I notice this page is protected, so definitely won't make any edits. I spent yesterday in Nagasaki, including time at the A-Bomb Museum and Peace Park. Have numerous pictures. When I have the time, will upload them to Commons for use here under cc-by-sa. Spent time last week in Hiroshima, including some time at the museum and peace park there, with many pictures. I'm heading back to Hiroshima this afternoon and will be there for a few more days. So, if there is anything else in Hiroshima that needs a picture, please say so.

For now, my pictures (mainly of Nagasaki and Hiroshima) are on Flickr in this set: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/kmf164/sets/72157601080401307/> I will try to take time later today to upload them to commons. Something here may be useful for this or other articles. --Aude (talk) 02:16, 10 August 2007 (UTC)

Also, I don't have time to look at the RFC in detail now, but notice it's about the death figures. The City of Nagasaki keeps official numbers on this. The current total for Nagasaki is 143,124. (I have a picture which shows this) I'll look again for numbers for Hiroshima. --Aude (talk) 02:20, 10 August 2007 (UTC)

I'm looking at the booklet for the Nagasaki Peace Ceremony yesterday. It includes the Nagasaki Peace Declaration by Tomihisa Taue (Mayor of Nagasaki). It says "the intense heat rays and severe blast winds, together with enormous amounts of radiation, claimed 74,000 lives and inflicted terrible injuries on 75,000 others" These are immediate deaths. When added together with deaths from a-bomb illnesses later, the total is 143,124. --Aude (talk) 06:15, 10 August 2007 (UTC)



**Figure 16:** Screenshot of comments, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_14](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_14).

The user “Aude” used their personal visit to Nagasaki to shed more light on the coverage of the atomic bombs by adding photographs and providing information on controversial topics, such as the number of the victims. The user posted the picture above in the discussion, which came from the Nagasaki National Peace Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims, calculating the number of victims to be 143,124 as of August 9, 2007.<sup>172</sup>

After “Aude” posted that picture, many users started to participate in the discussion and accept or challenge the number of the victims that the picture displayed. The following discussion took place (Figure 17). This discussion shows how Wikipedia editors can even use their personal experiences, from travels abroad or visiting museums, to produce historical knowledge. Some of the involved editors did not accept the number of deaths unquestioningly, or at least raised doubt as to which victims were included in this figure. Another interesting point is that even if

<sup>171</sup> “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 14,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_14](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_14)

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.* For the picture that the user “Aude” posted, see “File:Nagasaki deaths.jpg,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nagasaki\\_deaths.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nagasaki_deaths.jpg)

Does anyone else notice that the figure has changed, the tape is pretty obvious. How many times has it changed, and where did the new info come from to make the changes? [Anynobody](#) 05:03, 12 August 2007 (UTC)

They added the number of past 12 months death of after-effects sufferers. I think they do this every year.[Oda Mari](#) 05:12, 12 August 2007 (UTC)

The increasing victim count includes anyone who was in the city and has died, for any reason, since the bombing. [Torturous Devastating Cudgel](#)

It's the number of names in the registry, with 3,069 names added in the past year. These are people who died of radiation illnesses, and not other reasons. [\[20\]](#) [--Aude \(talk\)](#) 20:44, 14 August 2007 (UTC)

Does Japan have any scientific documentation that explains the basis for concluding that all the people they keep adding to this total really died from A-bomb-related causes? Is there any explanation as to why these numbers are so much higher than the numbers from RERF (an organization whose documentation is readily available for peer review)? [Oralloy](#) 08:34, 20 August 2007 (UTC)

I have a hard time believing that 62 years after the bombing, any death can be reliably attributed to radiation exposure.[Torturous Devastating Cudgel](#) 22:50, 14 August 2007 (UTC)

Both cities have their database. [\[21\]](#) [and \[22\]](#) [. Oda Mari](#) 10:09, 20 August 2007 (UTC)

This issue comes up often, every anniversary the mayors make speeches and the AP and Reuters report the number of [Hibakusha](#) who died the prior year as casualties of the atomic bomb. As [Oralloy](#) mentions above there's quite a discrepancy between RERF's > 428 deaths since 1950 and the various other figures for casualties due to radiation (i was half listening to HBO's new documentary the other night which claimed 160,000 fatalities from radiation since 1946.) It sure would be nice to find some kind of definitive statement and fill this hole in the article.—[eric](#) 21:35, 20 August 2007 (UTC)

**Figure 17:** Screenshot of comments, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_14](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_14).

the user “Aude” had realized that the page was “protected” from edits and modifications at that time, they still wanted to share the photographs from the Nagasaki Bomb Museum and the Nagasaki Peace Park. This suggests that Wikipedia users not only engage with history to place their own understandings of history in the main article, but they also feel the need to share and discuss their findings and thoughts. The “talk page” of a Wikipedia article becomes a space where editors define and redefine a historical event by (re)examining all its different aspects and all the available sources that will enable editors to offer better coverage.

By having a personal relation to a historical event or to related resources, Wikipedians present themselves as experts in a historical topic. In other words, Wikipedians claim that they have a more reliable knowledge than the other involved editors, thus their arguments can offer a better understanding of what happened in the past. In December 2008, the user “Jane McCann” created a discussion thread to criticize the atomic bombing article for being “west centric”.<sup>173</sup> The user “Binksternet,” who is one of the top editors of the article and frequently contributes to historical topics, questioned this critique of “Jane McCann” by asking them what

<sup>173</sup> “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 18,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_18](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_18)

needs to be changed.<sup>174</sup> These comments prompted an anonymous user to participate in the discussion:

I speak Japanese and have been to the Hiroshima Bomb Museum in Hiroshima, and the majority of what is written in this article is similar or the same to the Japanese viewpoint.<sup>175</sup>

The anonymous user did not agree with the first comment by “Jane McCann” that the analysis of the article presented a western point of view. The user challenged that idea through their own knowledge of the Japanese language and their visit to the Hiroshima Bomb Museum. The user also shared their personal engagement with Japanese culture to make it clear that the article represents this history in a manner similar or identical to how Japan represents the atomic bombings in the Hiroshima Bomb Museum.

Though these Wikipedia users did not have direct experience of this historical event, as they were not alive at the time when the bombings took place, their visits to museums, historical sites, or other related spaces legitimizes them to make historical arguments and persuade other involved editors about how to best edit Wikipedia pages. The scholar of translation studies, Henry Jones, has noticed a similar pattern in his article on the role of translation in the creation of Wikipedia content by examining the construction of the article on “Paris, France” on the English-language version of Wikipedia.<sup>176</sup> For Jones, there are two different dimensions. On the one hand, there are many members who, because they live in or near Paris subscribe most strongly to their own personal narratives about the place, based for the most part on their direct perceptions and lived experiences of their daily environment.<sup>177</sup> On the other hand, there are people from all over the world, some of whom have never visited Paris, so often they think about the French capital from Hollywood depictions and write about the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame Cathedral, Montmartre, etc.<sup>178</sup> The lived experience, even if it is (re)mediated and not directly connected to the historical event, gives editors the authority to talk about the past and redefine its representation on Wikipedia.

In May 2013, the user “Ghostofnemo” edited the introduction of the atomic bombing article, which included information about the numbers of victims, and added the following sentence: “In contrast, the number of civilian victims of Japa-

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174 Ibid.

175 Ibid.

176 Jones, “‘Wikipedia,’ Translation, and the Collaborative Production of Spatial Knowledge,” 265.

177 Ibid., 283.

178 Ibid.

nese democide during the war has been estimated at 5,424,000, which does not include military deaths”.<sup>179</sup> The user wanted to show that whilst the US was responsible for killing thousands of people through the dropping of atomic bombs, Japan itself was responsible for killing even more victims. When this sentence appeared in the article, other editors reverted the change immediately.<sup>180</sup> The user “Ghostofnemo” repeated the same edit, another editor then deleted it, and a debate started on the “talk page” of the article.

On the discussion page, the user “Ghostofnemo” created a thread with the title “Irrelevant to compare deaths caused by Japanese occupations?” and wrote:

An editor deleted a line comparing the death tolls from the atomic bombings with the civilian (non- military) death toll caused by the Japanese occupations of other countries (more than 5 million). Here is the diff of the deletion: [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&diff=553648763&oldid=553601701](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&diff=553648763&oldid=553601701) What do other editors think? It seems relevant to me, and necessary for a neutral point of view, because looking at the deaths of the atomic bomb victims in isolation gives an unbalanced view of historical events. Ghostofnemo (talk) 07:15, 6 May 2013 (UTC) If an article on the battle of the Little Big Horn only mentioned the losses of General Custer’s men, and didn’t mention the invasion and massacres of native Americans leading up to the battle, it would give readers a distorted picture of the conflict – i.e. that the U.S. soldiers were massacred for no apparent reason. Wow, I just checked that article and it doesn’t mention anything about the conflicts leading up to the battle! Wikipedia, got to love it.<sup>181</sup>

The user “Nick-D,” one of the top editors of the article and a member of the Wiki-Project Military History, strongly disagreed with that edit and argued that the comparison between the deaths caused by Japan and the atomic bombs does not make any sense.<sup>182</sup> The user “Ghostofnemo” pointed out that the comparison provides more context on the dropping of atomic bombs, and thus, it should be

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**179** For the version of the page after the edit, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&oldid=553601701](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=553601701)

**180** For the revision history of the page in May 2013, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&offset=20131012033813%7C576811411&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&offset=20131012033813%7C576811411&limit=500&action=history)

**181** “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_21](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_21)

**182** For the profile page of the user, see “User:Nick-D,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Nick-D>; “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21”.

placed in the main article.<sup>183</sup> The user “Boundarylayer,” another top editor of the page, gave a different perspective to the discussion. For them, the material should not be placed in the introduction of the article but maybe in a separate section.<sup>184</sup> “Binksternet” intervened and agreed that the comparison should not be placed in the introduction of the article, as the numbers are very “simplistic” and do not provide any context.<sup>185</sup> “Nick-D” responded by posting an extensive comment:

No, that’s not what I’m getting at at [sic] all I’m afraid. I don’t think that we need to include figures on the number of deaths the Japanese were responsible for here because it’s simply not relevant to the topic of the article, and encourages false comparisons. There’s a huge literature on why the US dropped the atomic bombs, and the decision to do so had almost nothing to do with the number of people the Japanese had killed: the focus was almost entirely on the hope that the bombs would end the war and avoid the expected huge number of American casualties which would result from the invasion of the Japanese home islands. The US wasn’t seeking revenge, and didn’t decide that the wickedness of Japan’s policies made the atomic bombings morally permissible, it just wanted to shock the Japanese leadership into admitting that the country was defeated. Much of the literature on the bombings also notes the change in the US Government’s attitude to bombing over the war, starting from a strong emphasis on precision bombing to avoid civilian casualties, and slowly moving towards an acceptance of area attacks which deliberately targeted civilians. To a significant degree, the atomic bombings were seen as a continuation of the huge raids which had destroyed Tokyo and most of Japan’s other cities in the final months of the war (though there was always a realization [sic] that destroying entire cities with a single bomb was a significant escalation of these attacks). Similarly, the great majority of people in the Japanese cities had nothing to do with the war crimes and killings committed by Japanese forces, so to imply a connection is false. To the extent that there was a debate over the comparative morality of the bombings, it took place after the war, and is better covered in the Debate over the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki article.<sup>186</sup>

The debate became even more intense when “Ghostofnemo” wrote that there is a tendency in Japan to ignore the victims killed by the Japanese and only remember the deaths caused by the Americans. For this user, Wikipedia should present the “reality” of both countries. Specifically, “Ghostofnemo” argued:

I think it’s relevant to mention the victims of Japan’s military in this article to put the death toll from the atomic bombings into context. In Japan, there is a tendency to ONLY focus on the victims of the atomic bombings, and to COMPLETELY overlook the much higher death tolls inflicted on civilians during Japanese occupations of other countries. Japan, innocent

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**183** “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21”.

**184** For the profile page of the user, see “User:Boundarylayer,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Boundarylayer>; “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21”.

**185** “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 21”.

**186** *Ibid.*



victim, America, evil slaughterers of civilians. The reality, which Wikipedia should reflect, is that both countries are guilty of committing huge war crimes.<sup>187</sup>

That argument inspired the user “Nick-D” to use their own personal engagement with the history of Japan and their visit to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in order to question the argument put forward by “Ghostofnemo”. “Nick-D” pointed out:

From what I saw during my visit to Japan and the works I’ve read about Japanese perspectives of the war, your claim that Japanese people generally believe that their country did nothing wrong and were “victims” is not at all correct (the much-visited Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is very clear on the point of Japanese misconduct, for example).<sup>188</sup>

“Ghostofnemo” made some comments to that post to express their disagreement and pointed out the lack of reference to the US victims that Japanese soldiers killed during WWII. The debate ended at this point and the edits proposed by “Ghostofnemo” were permanently removed from the article.

A similar incident took place in December 2016, when a debate started on the “talk page” and challenged the placement of a picture in the main article.<sup>189</sup> The picture depicted the atomic cloud over Nagasaki.<sup>190</sup> The user “Boundarylayer,” previously mentioned above, challenged the historical accuracy of this picture, as the cloud did not look like the cloud seen in the film footage.<sup>191</sup> For this user, the cloud was more likely to be either city fire clouds or a post-detonation fire.<sup>192</sup> Another user, “Hawkeye7,” the editor with the most edits to the page and a historian with a Ph.D. in military history, responded to this by arguing that the picture was a finding from secondary research, so it followed all Wikipedia’s guidelines and, more specifically, came from the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum.<sup>193</sup> In other words, the picture constituted a reliable historical source. At this point, the user

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187 Ibid.

188 Ibid.

189 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 23,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki/Archive\\_23](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki/Archive_23)

190 For the picture, see “File:Atomic cloud over Nagasaki from Koyagi-jima.jpeg,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Atomic\\_cloud\\_over\\_Nagasaki\\_from\\_Koyagi-jima.jpeg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Atomic_cloud_over_Nagasaki_from_Koyagi-jima.jpeg) For the version of the page before the discussion, see “Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic\\_bombings\\_of\\_Hiroshima\\_and\\_Nagasaki&oldid=755212172](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki&oldid=755212172)

191 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 23”.

192 Ibid. For the profile page of the user “Hawkeye7,” see “User:Hawkeye7,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Hawkeye7>

193 “Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 23”.

“Nick-D,” writing to support the use of the image in the article, referred again to their own visit to Japan:

There’s a photo of a similar view of Hiroshima following the bomb taken from Kure at the Kure Maritime Museum (aka the Yamato Museum). Unfortunately I didn’t take a photo of the caption.<sup>194</sup>

“Boundarylayer” then offered an extensive reply by questioning the role of museums as an always reliable source of historical knowledge.<sup>195</sup> In a part of their answer, the user mentioned:

Look, it is pretty obvious this photo is incorrectly labelled. Moreover it fails basic logical timing. Are we really going to take it on face value that someone was standing with a 1930–40s camera, ready to snap the mushroom cloud of the Nagasaki bomb, during the brief few seconds it was this low to the ground? Really? I’m incredulous. If the photo were of the mushroom cloud-stem, I wouldn’t be so skeptical, but it fairly clearly is of a cloud-cap. In any case, the museums have been corrected numerous times pushing photos that are clearly mis-identified. We’ve already detailed in the article how the corresponding Hiroshima museum was wrong twice already, when it came to 2 separate photographs. So the museums are not exactly a reliable source when it comes to photograph identification, are they? However I understand wiki-rules and thus I will try and see if I can generate a WP:RS. More on that below.<sup>196</sup>

Wikipedia editors do not passively consume history, even if it comes from an academic or an institutional place. They actively engage with what they find either digitally or physically. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen have pointed out that Americans trust eyewitnesses more than television or movies, feel closer to the past in museums because the artifacts are authentic, and feel unconnected to the past in history classrooms.<sup>197</sup> In the examples mentioned above, Wikipedians’ engagement with history is not a one-dimensional process. Museums and historical sites provide Wikipedians with information about the past and legitimize them to make historical arguments. Wikipedians then bring their thoughts and arguments into any related discussions on the site. They receive feedback from their fellow Wikipedians, get involved in debates, and thus construct a historical article.

The debate continued with “Nick-D” asking “Boundarylayer” for sources that could substantiate their claims. “Boundarylayer” replied:

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

[. . .] From my own research, browsing the Nagasaki museum. They state the photo was taken 15 mins post detonation, photographed at Koyagi jima(that's about 12 km South-West^ of the Nagasaki hypocenter). By cameraman Hiromichi Matsuda. [. . .] Now, I don't know how familiar [sic] you are with nuclear detonations, or mushroom clouds, but if you are a bit rusty: For devices of this yield range(~20 kiloton) and under perfectly calm surface wind conditions, the cloud reaches its max height of ~ 8 km in about 5 minutes and then begins to rapidly lose its shape when approaching around the 10 minute mark. After 20 mins it is totally unrecognizable, with the mark-1 eyeball, as ever having been a mushroom cloud. [. . .] So the actual "atomic cloud", would've been diffuse and well out of frame when he captured the scene over Nagasaki. While no firestorm at Nagasaki occurred (unless you're author Lynn Eden) the fires were still pretty intense^^ as city-fires go and the city did burn down over about a day or so. This cloud is likely to be from those conventional fires. [. . .] Honestly, it is pretty apparent that the 2 Japanese museums leave a lot to be desired when it comes to honestly conveying the facts, they seem obsessed with not doing a damn [sic] bit of research. Which is almost criminal in its sloppiness . . . and just think, someone is actually getting paid to work there? . . . Jesus wept.<sup>198</sup>

This user not only challenged the validity of the picture but also the role of the museum in the production of historical knowledge. They did not simply accept how the Japanese museums had contextualized the source but went even further and conducted their own research in order to explain what the picture showed. The other involved editors agreed with this analysis and the sources that "Boundarylayer" cited. Thus, the discussion ended, and the editors permanently removed the picture.

On Wikipedia, there is not just one form of engagement with the past, rather it can take shape in multiple different ways. Throughout all these levels of engagement, a user's individual agency is activated. The past is always in constant discussion and negotiation. Benjamin Filene has written about the "outsider history-makers," who work outside museums and universities and engage with history based on their enthusiasm, and "for [whom] the past is not remote and dead but a comfortable companion".<sup>199</sup> Though Filene refers to non-digital agents, such as genealogists, reenactors, and heritage tourism developers, Wikipedians also fit this framework and become "outsider history-makers," who look for academic sources, share their experiences from their visits to museums and other historical sites, post photos and claim expertise in a historical topic. Other Wikipedians often challenge them, question the reliability of their arguments, ask for more

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<sup>198</sup> "Talk:Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki/Archive 23".

<sup>199</sup> Benjamin Filene, "Passionate Histories: 'Outsider' History-Makers and What They Teach Us," *Public Historian* 34 (2012): 12. Rosenzweig and Thelen make a similar point for those engaging with history outside schools. For them, history in the classroom was dead and gone, see Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 110–13.

sources and more reliable historical arguments, and therefore construct a historical narrative.

However, as is the case with the Great Depression, due to the sheer length of time that has passed since the dropping of the atomic bombs, there are obviously no Wikipedia editors who were alive at that time and able to share any direct experiences from this historical event. Instead, there is only the (re)mediated reality as presented by museums and other historical sites. Wikipedians have access to the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki through secondary sources – both written and visual – and their own personal visits to related museum exhibitions or historical sites. The historical past of Hiroshima and Nagasaki seems distant and, therefore, the personal memories or experiences of Wikipedians do not characterize how Wikipedians perceive this history or aim to write about it. Wikipedia editors approach this historical event from a critical standpoint and get involved in the various discussions and debates about its representation on Wikipedia. Their engagement is mainly the result of secondary research and not of personal reflection

## Chapter 3

# Reconstructing the Recent Past on Wikipedia: The Vietnam War and September 11 attacks

In this chapter, I explore the articles on the Vietnam War and the September 11 attacks to examine how Wikipedians engage with history while they create historical narratives about the recent past. As I will show over the next few pages, Wikipedians approach the history of the Vietnam War and the September 11 attacks in a more personal and emotional way than in the articles relating to the Great Depression and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This does not mean that these two articles are products of personal reflection. Instead, there is a combination of multiple methods and approaches that lead to the production of historical knowledge. However, the “talk pages” of these two case studies reveal that the more recent nature of the Vietnam War and the September 11 attacks encourages Wikipedians to express their personal memories and experiences, which they try to integrate into the historical narratives of the two articles. This is significant, as it shows how editors engage with a more recent event in US history, how they make sense of the past while they try to contribute to the production of historical knowledge, and which of their contributions end up in the main articles.

## The Vietnam War

A major traumatic event in modern US history is Vietnam War. The Wikipedia article on the Vietnam War was created in November 2001 and has been constantly edited ever since.<sup>1</sup> It has been ranked as a level-4 vital article in History, and was a “good article” nominee but it did not ultimately manage to meet the overall “good article criteria”.<sup>2</sup> Several WikiProjects have been involved in the editing of the article, such as the WikiProject Military History, WikiProject Cold War, WikiProject History, WikiProject Socialism, WikiProject Vietnam, WikiProject Soviet Union, WikiProject Russia, WikiProject Southeast Asia, WikiProject Laos, WikiProject United States, WikiProject United States History, and WikiPro-

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1 “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Vietnam\\_War](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Vietnam_War)

2 “Talk:Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam_War)

ject Australia.<sup>3</sup> The article is also supported by two further projects, the Wikipedia Version 1.0 Editorial Team, which aims to publish articles for offline use, and the Pritzker Military Library WikiProject, which is responsible for improving articles related to the Pritzker Military Museum & Library in Chicago.<sup>4</sup> All these WikiProjects have rated the article as a C-class article, which means that there is room for further improvement.<sup>5</sup>

The main article is very extensive and covers different aspects of the Vietnam War. It contains an introductory section and some information on the historical background of the war, and then multiple sections on the history of Vietnam and the United States from the 1950s to 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Like most Wikipedia articles, the page on the Vietnam War contains table boxes, which in this case detail the countries involved, dates and locations of battles, results, commanders and leaders, strength, casualties, and losses, several pictures, maps, short films, and at the end of the page an extensive bibliography.<sup>7</sup>

The “talk pages” that sit behind the main article are also very long and there have been frequent discussion posts since the initial creation of the article in 2001.<sup>8</sup> As in all the previous articles we have considered, the discussion here is both diverse and refers to several different topics. Nevertheless, there are some common themes to which the involved editors have paid more attention and have tended to focus their editing activity. The most popular topic of discussion relates to the “defeat” of the US in the Vietnam War. Some Wikipedians have expressed their doubts as to whether the war was a victory or a defeat; and, even if it was a defeat, whether it was then a military defeat or a political defeat.

In November 2006, the main article on the Vietnam War mentioned that the Vietnam War constituted a political defeat for the US and a military victory for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> An anonymous user interpreted this statement as suggesting that the war was not only a political defeat for the US, but also

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid. For these two projects, see “Wikipedia:Version 1.0 Editorial Team,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Version\\_1.0\\_Editorial\\_Team](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Version_1.0_Editorial_Team); “Wikipedia:GLAM/Pritzker,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:GLAM/Pritzker>

5 “Talk:Vietnam War”.

6 “Vietnam War”.

7 Ibid.

8 “Talk:Vietnam War”.

9 For the version of the article in early November 2006, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=87388601](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=87388601)

a military defeat. On this point, the user then created a discussion thread titled “American Defeat?” in which they wrote:

I notice the article once said “political defeat” and now “Political and military” defeat in the war box, US won every single engagement of the war apart from the earlier Vietcong victories [sic] that fueled the US intervention.<sup>10</sup>

Another user, “RM Gillespie,” one of the top editors on the article with several awarded barnstars for their contributions relating to the Vietnam War, responded:

Every single engagement of the war? Perhaps you have never heard of the fall of the Ashau SF border camp? Or the loss of Kham Duc – the largest American defeat of the conflict?<sup>11</sup>

While this debate was taking place, the involved editors were editing the article on the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup> On December 28, 2006, the user “Cripipper,” a significant editor of the article with several contributions, edited the result of the Vietnam War in the inbox of the article and added that the war was both a “political defeat for the U.S”. and a “strategic military defeat for the U.S”.<sup>13</sup>

However, on the discussion page the debate continued. More and more users were taking part in the discussion. For some editors, the war was a political defeat for the US and a military defeat for the South Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> For other editors, the reunification of North and South Vietnam under a communist regime and the withdrawal of US troops signified both a political and military defeat.<sup>15</sup> The user “Corporaljohny” argued in a comment that the withdrawal of US military forces from the Vietnam War did not signify a military defeat but a political one, as it was a result of Congress pulling military funding.<sup>16</sup> This user did not only leave their comment on the discussion page, but also then deleted the sentence “strate-

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<sup>10</sup> “Talk:Vietnam War/Archive 6,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam\\_War/Archive\\_6#American\\_Defeat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam_War/Archive_6#American_Defeat)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. For the profile page of the user “RM Gillespie,” see “User:RM Gillespie,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:RM\\_Gillespie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:RM_Gillespie)

<sup>12</sup> For the revision history of the page between November 2006 and January 2007, see “Vietnam War: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&dir=prev&offset=20061109120123%7C86697610&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&dir=prev&offset=20061109120123%7C86697610&limit=500&action=history)

<sup>13</sup> For the version of the article after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=96912331](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=96912331)

<sup>14</sup> “Talk:Vietnam War/Archive 6”.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

gic military defeat for the U.S”. from the infobox of the main article.<sup>17</sup> After some days, “Cripipper” intervened again and added the following line to the infobox, suggesting that the Vietnam War had resulted in a “political and strategic defeat for the U.S”.<sup>18</sup> On the discussion page, “Cripipper” also directly replied to “Corporaljohny” by making the comment below:

U.S. troops were not withdrawn because of Congress pulling the funding for them. They were withdrawn as part of Nixon’s “Vietnamization” plan.<sup>19</sup>

Following the same line of thinking, another user, “Heavy Metal Cellist,” added:

Congress withdrew funding because everyone had realized that the war was a stalemate, and that the US wasn’t winning. Consensus has already been reached on this issue; the war was a strategic defeat as well. I have corrected the battlebox to the status of the war that we agreed on back in December.<sup>20</sup>

The involved users made some more posts on the “talk page,” but the main article did not receive any more editing changes.

Around the same time, another anonymous user created a related discussion thread titled “Political defeat for US (?),” in which the user expressed their strong opposition to the characterization of the US defeat as “political”.<sup>21</sup> This user made the following comments:

I notice this article refers to the war as being a “political defeat” for the U.S. A number of commentators these days refer to the U.S. defeat as “political,” and not military as well. I do not believe this is the case. Make no mistake, this war was a military defeat for the U.S. Just because the VC didn’t follow the Western “rules” of classic military conflict doesn’t mean that they didn’t prevail militarily. Guerrilla warfare is every bit as valid a form of war as any classic Western military doctrine. [ . . . ] Additionally, if you’re going to label this war as a “political,” and not military defeat for the U.S., then you could really say the same for many other wars throughout history. For example, you could say that the German defeat in World War I was a “political” defeat (as strikes and political turbulence on their homefront played a major role in their defeat). Same thing goes for World War II. If Hitler had simply allowed his generals to run the war and had not meddled, then the Germans would have probably prevailed.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For the version of the article after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=98702739](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=98702739)

<sup>18</sup> For the version of the article after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=98856916](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=98856916)

<sup>19</sup> “Talk:Vietnam War/Archive 6”.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> “Talk:Vietnam War/Archive 6”.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



For this user, the article misrepresented the outcome of the Vietnam War and followed a biased, Western-centric point of view, which goes against the main principles of Wikipedia. The comment motivated other editors to engage with this issue and write down their own interpretations. The user “Dan4J” agreed with the anonymous user’s statement and asked the involved editors to review this position.<sup>23</sup> Another user intervened and argued:

No matter what you do, no matter how you want to lable [sic] it, when you leave, you lose. Period. If not emotionally attached, it should not be a difficult concept to understand.<sup>24</sup>

This user, “Factus,” made an interesting point. They argued that the use of the term “political defeat” to describe the result of the Vietnam War reveals an emotional bond with the conflict and makes it clear that the history of the Vietnam War is not represented neutrally on the Wikipedia page. As shown in the first chapter, emotions and personal points of view do not comply with Wikipedia guidelines and policies. For “Factus,” the use of “political defeat” signifies an emotional attachment to the past that favors the US position on the war and does not present a balanced historical narrative.

At the same time, a similar discussion thread appeared on the “talk page” with the title “Strategic Military Defeat for the US?” in which some users argued that the Vietnam War was a “political loss” but not a military one, as the US won all the related battles.<sup>25</sup> Other editors intervened in the discussion and the debate continued. Their arguments were very similar to those mentioned above. Meanwhile, on January 13, 2007, the user “Hanzohattori” edited the article and removed the line that the Vietnam War was a “political and strategic defeat for the U.S” from the infobox.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the article included only that the war signified a “military victory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam over Republic of Vietnam forces in 1975”.<sup>27</sup> There were no references to the US. A few days later, the user “Cripipper” edited the article again and added a line designating the war as a “political defeat for United States”.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> “Talk:Vietnam War/Archive 7,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam\\_War/Archive\\_7#Strategic\\_Military\\_defeat\\_for\\_the\\_US](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam_War/Archive_7#Strategic_Military_defeat_for_the_US)

<sup>26</sup> For the version of the article after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=100493932](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=100493932)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> For the version of the article after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=104626199](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=104626199)

However, the debate did not end there. Some months later, a discussion thread titled “The outcome was not simply ‘Defeat for the US and Allies,’” appeared on the “talk page” of the article, continuing the debate about whether the result of the Vietnam War was a military or political defeat.<sup>29</sup> An anonymous user tried to explain that the Vietnam War could not be regarded and represented as a military defeat, as the US had managed to accomplish all its objectives.<sup>30</sup> That statement provoked several reactions from other editors, who intervened in the discussion. The user “Mmx1” expressed their disagreement, arguing:

And what is the difference between military defeat and political defeat? The purpose of military force is to serve political ends. Whether South Vietnam fell because of the generals or politicians is irrelevant; in the end NVA tanks were still rolling through Saigon. Calling it a “tactical” victory may let you pat yourself on the back for a job well done but it’s irrelevant if it fails to uphold our strategic aims – which it did.<sup>31</sup>

Another user, “I stand on land,” replied:

Military objectives are not always the same as political ones. Our far reaching political objective was the securing of the area to stem the spread of communism. The military objective of the Vietnam war was to stop the North Vietnamese forces from overrunning South Vietnam. The military objectives were on a tactical and strategic level, and once completed, were counted successful. Tactically, we were successful until we felt it no longer necessary to hold a military presence. There’s no rationale to suggest that the military was anything but successful until the disengagement; the point at which it was determined the objectives were met. By the logic in the last paragraph, the US lost world war I because we did not politically create stability in Germany.<sup>32</sup>

The debate continued with more Wikipedia users getting involved in the discussion and expressing their own historical understandings about the outcome of the Vietnam War. While these discussions were taking place, several editors again started to edit the main article on the Vietnam War and, more specifically, the infobox within the article.<sup>33</sup> On May 10, 2007, the user “El C” removed the term “political”

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<sup>29</sup> “Talk:Vietnam War/Archive 9,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam\\_War/Archive\\_9#The\\_outcome\\_was\\_not\\_simply\\_%22Defeat\\_for\\_the\\_US\\_and\\_Allies%22](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam_War/Archive_9#The_outcome_was_not_simply_%22Defeat_for_the_US_and_Allies%22)

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> For the revision history of the page between May and June 2007, see “Vietnam War: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&dir=prev&offset=20070416071040%7C123189569&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&dir=prev&offset=20070416071040%7C123189569&limit=500&action=history)

from “United States defeat”.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the article then simply mentioned that the Vietnam War had resulted in the “United States defeat”. A few days later, the user “Kobalt64” added that the outcome of the Vietnam War was a “decisive defeat of United States and allied armed forces”.<sup>35</sup> One hour after this, the user “Hughstew,” the top editor of the article and a holder of a Master’s degree in History, as mentioned on their profile page, deleted the term “decisive” and changed the sentence to “defeat of United States and Allies”.<sup>36</sup> On May 19, the user “I stand on land,” made a radical change to the article. They added to the infobox that the outcome of the Vietnam War was a “strategic defeat for US and Allies” and a “tactical victory for US and Allies”.<sup>37</sup> Immediately, the user “Sohelpme” deleted the “tactical victory for US and Allies” from the infobox and changed the result into “overall defeat for US and Allies”.<sup>38</sup> One day later, on May 20, 2007, the user “Hughstew” removed the term “overall” from the “defeat,” claiming that this term did not make any sense.<sup>39</sup> The editing of the article continued, and on June 3, 2007, the user “kaliqx” added the term “political” to the “defeat for the US and Allies” and mentioned that the Vietnam War also resulted in the “withdrawal of American military personnel”.<sup>40</sup> The next day, the user “Hughstew” removed the term “political” by claiming that the use of the word “political” was biased and represented a “POV”.<sup>41</sup> The same user also argued that the official history of the US army does not present that view. One day later, the user “kaliqx” once again made an edit, this time deleting the

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<sup>34</sup> For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=129729089](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=129729089)

<sup>35</sup> For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=131467469](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=131467469)

<sup>36</sup> For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=131475001](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=131475001) For the profile page of the user, see “User:Hughstew,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Hughstew> For the top editors of the page, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Vietnam\\_War](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Vietnam_War)

<sup>37</sup> For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=131946032](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=131946032)

<sup>38</sup> For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=132067371](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=132067371)

<sup>39</sup> For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=132139246](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=132139246)

<sup>40</sup> For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=135510565](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=135510565)

<sup>41</sup> For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=135737888](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=135737888)

whole sentence “Defeat for the US and Allies”.<sup>42</sup> A few hours later, the user “Hughstew” removed the edit and reverted the older version of the article.<sup>43</sup> On June 12, 2007, the user “Onetwo1” removed the whole sentence “Defeat for the US and Allies” and the debate ended here for a while.<sup>44</sup>

Over time, however, the debate about the result of the Vietnam War resumed and the Wikipedia page continued to receive frequent changes right up until the current version of the page. Since 2007, the article’s infobox does not have any reference to whether the Vietnam War was a defeat, military or political, for the United States. In 2011, in a discussion thread named “Not Stating USA was defeated is POV,” several Wikipedians argued that the lack of reference to the defeat of the US in the Vietnam War constituted a clear violation of POV, as the US did not manage to achieve their objectives.<sup>45</sup> Other Wikipedians replied that the US did not lose the war, as American forces left before the defeat of the South Vietnamese.<sup>46</sup> The debate about the outcome of the Vietnam War did not continue any further. Now, the current version of the article includes a reference which states that the Vietnam War resulted in a “North Vietnamese and Viet Cong/PRG victory,” the “withdrawal of U.S. coalition’s forces from Vietnam,” “Communist forces tak[ing] power in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos,” the “Reunification of Vietnam,” the “Start of the boat people and refugee crises,” and the “Start of the Cambodian genocide and the third Indochina War”.<sup>47</sup>

The example above is a sample from a long and extensive debate about whether the war resulted in either a military or a political defeat for the US. The conflicts between Wikipedia users in relation to this topic were not only about how a historical event should be represented on Wikipedia, but also how the involved editors should deal with a traumatic historical event and present it in a balanced and neutral way, as Wikipedia guidelines require. On the one hand, some editors could not accept the notion of a US defeat in Vietnam, so they saw the practice of editing as a chance to change or re-examine what had happened in the past. On the other hand, some editors followed Wikipedia’s guidelines

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42 For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=136274067](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=136274067)

43 For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=136516693](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=136516693)

44 For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=137640001](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=137640001)

45 “Talk:Vietnam War/Archive 18,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam\\_War/Archive\\_18#Not\\_stating\\_USA\\_was\\_defeated\\_is\\_POV](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam_War/Archive_18#Not_stating_USA_was_defeated_is_POV)

46 *Ibid.*

47 “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War)

more closely, engaged with academic works, and tried to represent the history of the war in a non-biased way. Ultimately, for those on both sides, Wikipedia becomes a space where history does not belong to the past but is always present and negotiable. Wikipedia gives the public the opportunity to not only narrate the past, but also to reconstruct and perform it.<sup>48</sup>

In the last decades, several studies have examined the neutrality of Wikipedia's contents and many have criticized Wikipedia for its perceived gender bias and the lack of content about women. As was also shown in the case of the Great Depression, these critiques have forced Wikipedia editors to pay more attention to gender-related issues and to ensure that Wikipedia's contents is more inclusive. A relevant incident took place on the "talk page" of the Vietnam War article, where one user, "Goldsphinx," wrote:

Hello! As part of a gender equity project for my college course, I would like to add a section to the Vietnam War article entitled "American Women in Vietnam". While the existing article as a whole is very rich in detail, I think that Wikipedia users would benefit from my contribution. After conducting extensive research, I have prepared a section that I feel is appropriate. The section includes information about the jobs that women held in Vietnam while on active duty and also briefly explores the dynamics between men and women serving in Vietnam. I feel the addition of a women's section would complement the existing article and provide a more complete picture of the Vietnam War.<sup>49</sup>

In the framework of collaboration between Wikipedia and educational institutions, this user wanted to share their project on the role of American women in the Vietnam War.<sup>50</sup> In this way, the user thought that they could contribute to the development of the article and make the coverage of the topic even more inclusive by adding a section on a neglected area pertaining to the conflict. However, not all users agreed with that suggestion. Another user, "Owain the 1<sup>st</sup>," replied:

Why just American women? Not going to bother with Vietnamese women? I do not agree with just a section for American women. If you want to put a section in about women then include them all or do not bother. This article already suffers from too much from the American side and does not need any more I believe.<sup>51</sup>

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**48** On the performative dimension of the past, see J. Winter, "The Performance of the Past: Memory, History, Identity," in *Performing the Past. Memory, History and Identity in Europe*, ed. K. Tilmans, F. van Vree, and J. Winter (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 11–23; Jerome de Groot, "Invitation to Historians," *Rethinking History* 18 (2014): 599–612.

**49** "Talk:Vietnam War/Archive 19," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam\\_War/Archive\\_19](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam_War/Archive_19)

**50** On the collaboration between Wikipedia and academia, see Ramjohn and Davis, "Equity, Policy, and Newcomers".

**51** "Talk:Vietnam War/Archive 19".

Goldsphinx, I would suggest that you place the material here on the talk page so that we may see what you are talking about.

» [Berean-Hunter](#) → [\(\(@\)\)](#) 18:56, 27 April 2011 (UTC)

Not only that, but if it's original research it might not belong here. [Intothatdarkness](#) (talk) 20:04, 27 April 2011 (UTC)

Not only that, but the mention of "active duty" suggests that this is limited to American Women serving in the military. I'm not female, but I spent the years of '64-'72 in Vietnam as a US govt contractor and can observe from my experience there (though I can't presently cite reliable supporting sources for this) that a fair number of nonmilitary women from the US and elsewhere also spent time in Vietnam in various capacities during the VN War years. [Wtmitchell](#) (talk) (earlier *Boracay Bill*) 09:39, 28 April 2011 (UTC)

Quite so. You had women from the Red Cross, USO, USAID I think had some, embassy staff, and missionaries working in SVN, and that's just from the US. [Intothatdarkness](#) (talk) 14:31, 28 April 2011 (UTC)

**Figure 18:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam\\_War/Archive\\_19](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam_War/Archive_19).

An interesting dialogue then followed this comment, in which several users expressed their own thoughts about a potential section on the role of women in the Vietnam War (Figure 18).

The user “Wtmitchell,” who is one of the top editors of the article, used their own personal memory from their involvement in the Vietnam War to confirm that several nonmilitary American women took part in the war.<sup>52</sup> It is interesting that, on the one hand, Wikipedia editors use academic secondary sources to provide a balanced and impartial historical narrative on the Vietnam War, and, on the other hand, their own personal experiences are also present in the discussion and often determine how they approach history. It is even more interesting, in this case, that the other involved users seemed to be convinced by the comments from “Wtmitchell”. Specifically, they made the following replies in the discussion thread (Figure 19).

If this can be written in a NPOV manner and covers all sides of the story then yes (but it might be better as a separate linked article. [Slaterstevenson](#) (talk) 14:39, 28 April 2011 (UTC)

I realize that women held a variety of positions during the Vietnam War, and that they all deserve to be covered. However, my hope is that my addition to this article may serve as a starting place to open up discussion rather than act as an end-all authority. I now see that my title may be misleading- my section is specifically about female nurses serving in Vietnam, so I will change the title to clarify this. As for the role that Vietnamese women played in the war, I agree that it too is deserving of recognition. However, as I am not an expert on Vietnamese women, I will leave it to others better informed than myself to make their own contributions regarding this topic. [Goldsphinx](#) (talk) 16:12, 28 April 2011 (UTC)

Great! Show us what you've got.

» [Berean-Hunter](#) → [\(\(@\)\)](#) 16:17, 28 April 2011 (UTC)

If you want to put your piece in then go ahead but title it like women in the Vietnam war or something like that then people can add stuff about Vietnamese women as well. Good luck. [Owain the 1st](#) (talk) 16:19, 28 April 2011 (UTC)

**Figure 19:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam\\_War/Archive\\_19](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Vietnam_War/Archive_19).

As a result, the user “Goldsphinx” attached a section on American Nurses in Vietnam accompanied by a short bibliography. Other users then gave feedback to

<sup>52</sup> For the top editors of the article, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Vietnam\\_War](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Vietnam_War)

“Goldsphinx,” made comments on their work, and suggested improvements to the length, prose, and structure of the proposed section. Finally, on April 28, 2011, once the relevant discussions had reached their conclusion, all the involved editors created a section titled “Women in Vietnam,” to which they added “Goldsphinx” piece.<sup>53</sup> The editors did not stop at this point, however; they continued to investigate the topic. In the next two days, they added a further piece on the participation of Vietnamese women in the war, which was then gradually developed over time.<sup>54</sup> A few years later, the editors also added one more subsection on the role of women journalists, who had been reporting the war.<sup>55</sup>

In the examples analyzed above, Wikipedia functions as a digital space where Wikipedians can share their memories and experiences about the Vietnam War. At the same time, Wikipedia becomes a place where users can cite the academic works that they have read in relation to the topic and make historical arguments based on their sources. The coexistence of personal memories and lived experiences of the recent past with secondary sources challenges the general perception of Wikipedia and its contents as being exclusively the result of secondary research. Instead, it complicates the process of historical knowledge production. It is, however, evident that the transformation of discussion topics on the “talk pages” into the sort of historical knowledge that is then presented in the main articles goes through a process of gatekeeping, in which some more experienced editors check the validity of the proposed edits and then confirm or reject them.

As shown above, certain users aimed to change the historical narrative about the Vietnam War as it was represented in the main article. They shared their interpretations and understandings of this historical event and tried to convince fellow Wikipedians that their points merited inclusion on the main page. Wikipedia blurs the famous distinction of Hayden White between the “practical past” and the “historical past”.<sup>56</sup> According to White, the “historical past” is the past historians try to study scientifically, while the “practical past” is the past as a space

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53 For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=426408049#Women\\_in\\_Vietnam](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=426408049#Women_in_Vietnam)

54 For the version of the page after the edit, see “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&oldid=426803808#Women\\_in\\_Vietnam](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&oldid=426803808#Women_in_Vietnam) For the revision history of the article during April and May 2011, see “Vietnam War: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam\\_War&offset=20110519085733%7C429851833&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vietnam_War&offset=20110519085733%7C429851833&limit=500&action=history)

55 See the current version of the article: “Vietnam War,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War)

56 Hayden White, “The Practical Past,” *Historiein* 10 (2010): 10–19; Hayden White, “Politics, History and the Practical Past,” *Storia della Storiografia* 61 (2012): 127–34.

of experience. The latter has practical and political use in the present. On Wikipedia, there is a dialogue between the “practical” and the “historical” past. The two pasts are not in conflict but coexist and determine users’ engagement with history and the production of historical knowledge. Of course, in the “talk pages,” there is an emphasis on the “practical past,” the aspects of the past which most users are interested in and tend to bring into the discussion. Meanwhile, in the main article, there is the “historical past,” which is the product of discussions, debates, guidelines, policies, and historical arguments. Nevertheless, both pages are in a constant dialogue. They redefine each other. Edits in the main article provoke debates, and these debates typically result in further edits. The debates force users to intervene in the discussion and share their personal experiences. These experiences often become the starting point for further research via secondary works that then help users to shape their own historical arguments and reconstruct the past according to Wikipedia’s guidelines. In the “talk page” relating to the Vietnam War article, personal memories and experiences from the past blend with users’ interpretations of various secondary sources and define Wikipedians’ efforts to produce historical narratives about the subject.

## The September 11 attacks

The September 11 attacks are widely acknowledged as some of the most traumatic events in modern US history. The main Wikipedia entry relating to these events was initially created on November 11, 2001, and has been constantly updated ever since.<sup>57</sup> The Wikipedia community lists the article as a “level-4 vital article in History”.<sup>58</sup> The article is also part of multiple WikiProjects, such as the WikiProject International Relations, WikiProject Islam, WikiProject Military History, WikiProject Terrorism, WikiProject United States, WikiProject United States History, etc.<sup>59</sup> There is a separate WikiProject that focuses on the September 11 attacks, the WikiProject September 11, 2001.<sup>60</sup> Regarding the rating of the article, it is a “former featured article” and has been listed as a “History good article”.<sup>61</sup> The article has

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57 “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/September\\_11\\_attacks](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/September_11_attacks)

58 “Talk:September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks)

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.* For “History good articles,” see “Wikipedia:Good articles/History,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Good\\_articles/History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Good_articles/History)



also appeared ten times in the report about the top twenty-five Wikipedia articles of the week.<sup>62</sup>

The main article offers extensive coverage of the attacks. Its contents include some more general information on the historical context in which these events took place, and there are more specialized sections on the attacks themselves, the aftermath, the effects, the subsequent investigations, the memorials, etc.<sup>63</sup> Images, videos, and graphs coexist and contribute to the coverage of the September 11 attacks.<sup>64</sup> An interesting characteristic of the main article is that almost every section has a hyperlink to a separate article that analyzes that particular topic more extensively. For example, the section on the attacks themselves has a link to the Wikipedia article “Timeline for the day of the September 11 attacks,” and the section on the memorials for the 9/11 attacks has a link to the article “Memorials and services for the September 11 attacks”.<sup>65</sup> This shows how extensively the editors have analyzed the topic and how they have created separate articles in which they provide more detailed coverage of each related sub-topic. The discussion page of the article is the longest of all the other examined case studies, which is probably because the 9/11 attacks belong to the recent past and, therefore, more people have lived experiences of that day. The article covers multiple topics. Two of the most frequently discussed topics, which I will analyze in this section, are whether the September 11 attacks were terrorist acts or not, and whether personal memories and experiences about the 9/11 attacks should have a place in the article.<sup>66</sup>

Following the initial creation of the article, the editors started to discuss what terrorism is more generally, what potentially made these attacks terroristic, and, more importantly, whether these attacks truly were acts of terrorism. This happened because the very first sentence of the main page mentioned that the September 11 attacks constituted “the deadliest terrorist attack in human history”.<sup>67</sup> Many users

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<sup>62</sup> “Talk:September 11 attacks”. For the top 25 report, see “Wikipedia:Top 25 Report,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Top\\_25\\_Report](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Top_25_Report)

<sup>63</sup> “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September\\_11\\_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks)

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> There was also extensive discussion of the conspiracy theories related to the 9/11 attacks, which I could not include in this section. This discussion soon resulted in the creation of a separate Wikipedia article, see “9/11 conspiracy theories,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/9/11\\_conspiracy\\_theories](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/9/11_conspiracy_theories)

<sup>67</sup> For the version of the article in September 2002, see “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=343551](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=343551)

Can anyone think of deadlier terrorist attacks? I have trouble imagining one. Wars, battles, and government-driven massacres have killed more people in one day, but nothing that could be reasonably described as a terrorist incident. Correct? --[The Cunctator](#)

I think that it may go to the definition of "terrorist", which is notoriously problematic. Are government-driven massacres terrorist attacks? I'm inclined to say that they are, since a major purpose is to instill fear in the remaining population; "state terrorism" is not an oxymoron to me. Others will disagree, of course. So in any case, in order to be impartial on the state terrorism issue, we would have to say "deadliest non-state terrorist incident".

I made the change when I did specifically because I realised that I no longer saw US news media describing the attack as the worst ever, only as the worst in the US. Perhaps they were simply being cautious, but should we not be as cautious? Ultimately, I think that the burden of proof rests on those making the claim, and I didn't see any attempt to justify it on the talk page; if I had, I'd have added to that discussion first. But I may have missed something, so let me know.

— [Toby](#) 01:55 Sep 29, 2002 (UTC)

Unless you can provide an example of a deadlier terrorist attack, I am reverting it to deadliest in the "world". --[rmhermen](#)

I can't imagine why you think the burden of proof lies with *me*. It would be one thing if most other sources agreed with you. But they don't; outside of right-wing literature, I usually see only phrases like "deadliest terrorist attack in US history" or "deadliest act of terrorism on US soil". It would be one thing if I were saying "What most people think that they know isn't necessarily so...". But I'm not; instead, you're the one that's advocating a stronger statement than the other media are making.

In an attempt to do your research for you, I looked for historical surveys of terrorist incidents with death tolls, as well as for examples of deadlier terrorist incidents. I found nothing useful either way. So perhaps the other news media simply don't know. Well, fine, but we don't know either. We can't just make up information since we suspect that it goes one way rather than the other. Since you are advocating making claims that you don't know to be true, while I am not, I say that *you* should provide a reference to a comprehensive survey that ranks this attack deadliest *before* putting such a phrase in. This is nothing more than simple intellectual integrity, on the part of all of us.

— [Toby](#) 06:02 Oct 29, 2002 (UTC)

[...]

"Some people claim that it was the deadliest terrorist attack in the world."

Can somebody point me to a deadlier terrorist attack that ever took place? --[mav](#)

depends on your definition of terrorism im sure...[Vera Cruz](#)

Exactly. And on what you consider a single attack. And on whether you consider indirect deaths as counting. Perhaps "many people" would be more acceptable? -[Martin](#)

Based on our own definition at [terrorism](#). --[mav](#)

I'll go check out our definition, but for a discussion of deadlier attacks, Noam Chomsky, for example, [argues](#) that the attack on the Sudanese pharmaceutical plant had a far greater death toll in total, so it depends on your definition of terrorism and how you count the deaths. (3 edit conflicts so far.) [Dankeshet](#)

"Terrorism refers to the systemic or calculated use of violence or the threat of violence, against the civilian population, to instill fear in an audience for purposes of obtaining political goals"

The holocaust would do then. Note that [terrorism](#) has an entire section on "Problems with the definition"... -[Martin](#)

Using this definition, Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing, was the greatest terrorist attacks (calculated use of violence against the civilian population, to instill fear in an audience of obtaining political goals) [62:212.110.113](#) 10:29 4 Jul 2003 (UTC)

**Figure 20:** Screenshots of discussion, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_2).

took part in the discussion and tried to find other deadly terrorist attacks that had taken place in human history and to understand why the September 11 attacks were considered to be the deadliest according to Wikipedia. I cite a few examples from those discussions here (Figure 20).

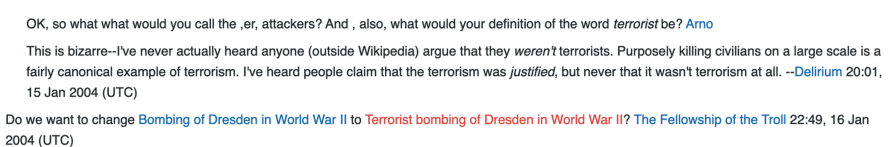
These excerpts are only part of a more extensive discussion; however, they are representative of how certain Wikipedia users had started to make sense of the September 11 attacks, examining whether they were the deadliest attacks in human history and what particular features made the attacks terrorist in nature. In doing so, the users were trying to better understand the attacks and,

perhaps more significantly, to decide on how these events should be represented in the article. To better codify what happened in the past, the users compared the September 11 attacks to other contemporary events in US history.

In January 2004, another discussion started on the “talk page” of the main article and focused on whether the word “terrorism” constituted a point of view (POV). At that time, the article had as its sub-title “The September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks”.<sup>68</sup> As such, several users started to discuss whether this term was appropriate for the historical representation of 9/11, or if it potentially violated Wikipedia’s position on neutrality. Specifically, the user “Kingsturtle” wrote:

Yes, the events of September 11, 2001 were heinous [sic] and caused great pain and hardship. Nevertheless, the term terrorist is POV. The definition changes through time, and can be debated. President Reagan said it best: “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”. He said this when defending the actions of people he supported who were accused of being terrorists. Terrible acts of this kind that you support, you can call freedom fighting. The word terrorist can only exist with a POV. I realize it is difficult to change all the related pages, but they should really all be renamed September 11, 2001 attacks. P.S. No, I do not think the attackers were freedom fighters. But I don’t think they were terrorists either. Terrorist is a label placed.<sup>69</sup>

For this user, the term “terrorism” signified a POV, so the editors should avoid it. Other users responded to that comment and took part in the discussion (Figure 21).



**Figure 21:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_2).

The other involved users did not seem to agree with the suggestion by “Kingsturtle”. For some of them, it was more than obvious that the attacks were acts of terrorism, while others compared the 9/11 attacks with other historical events of the past in order to show that the term could be equally applied to other examples. The discussion continued, as more and more users began to take part on the “talk page” to discuss whether these were “terrorist” attacks, and, even if they

<sup>68</sup> “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=2072923](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=2072923)

<sup>69</sup> “Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 2”.

You may not move this page w/o moving the associated talk page and fixing the many double redirects linking to the new article. Why singular, not plural? The phrase "September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks" is the overwhelming convention used. Please make your case before moving and move it properly if you do, or it will be moved back again. --Jiang 23:26, 14 Jan 2004 (UTC)

See above. "Terrorist" has taken on an inherently negative meaning, just like the word "murder". It is not a simple technical term. If we were to talk about "Israeli terrorism" when Israel bombs civilian centres in the occupied territories, people would object too. So please move it back. --Wik 14:52, Jan 15, 2004 (UTC)

I don't see why that's a problem. Murdering an office-building full of civilians is a canonical example of terrorism. The fact that that has inherently negative connotations is hardly surprising, as most people consider killing civilian inhabitants of an office building an inherently bad thing. Are you going to argue that we can't say Charles Manson had anything to do with murder now, because that would be characterizing him in an inherently negative way? Should we neutrally say that he caused the lives of some people to end? --Delirium 19:58, 15 Jan 2004 (UTC)

We can't pass off moral judgments as fact, even if they are held by "most people". Some people do justify those attacks, so we can't use language that implies condemnation. Those who justify it don't call it terrorism. If this article is not moved, anyone might as well describe Israeli or U.S. military actions as (state) terrorism. Remember the U.S. killed some 3,000 civilians in Afghanistan alone, and an additional 10,000 in Iraq. --Wik 20:56, Jan 15, 2004 (UTC)

So we can't call Charles Manson a murderer either, because that implies condemnation? I don't see the difference. In this case, it's held by *nearly all people*. Even Iran calls it "terrorism" (they imply the US brought it on itself, but still use the term "terrorism"). "State terrorism", by contrast, is far more controversial. --Delirium 21:48, 15 Jan 2004 (UTC)

We are to report facts, not make moral judgments. Why call Charles Manson a murderer and not George W. Bush, who is responsible for many more killings? We should only report factually who killed whom, and let the readers make their own moral judgment. --Wik 22:17, Jan 15, 2004 (UTC)

What do those who disagree with the label "terrorist" call these attacks then? I don't see how these attacks don't meet *our* definition of terrorism - "calculated use of violence or the threat of violence, against the civilian population, usually for the purpose of obtaining political or religious goals." --Jiang 21:46, 15 Jan 2004 (UTC)

Simply "attacks". The title "September 11, 2001 Attacks" is absolutely sufficient and unambiguous. I think "our" definition of terrorism is incomplete, missing the inherent negativism. The term is not used in this merely technical sense; the actual "terrorists" rarely see themselves as "terrorists". --Wik 22:17, Jan 15, 2004 (UTC)

Al-Jazeera uses "terrorist" [4]. Can you show me links of how the Arab/leftist media refers to these attacks? Here's Merriam-Webster's definition: "the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion" and terror: "1 : a state of intense fear 2 a : one that inspires fear : SCOURGE b : a frightening aspect <the terrors of invasion> c : a cause of anxiety : WORRY d : an appalling person or thing; especially : BRAT 3 : REIGN OF TERROR 4 : violence (as bombing) committed by groups in order to intimidate a population or government into granting their demands <insurrection and revolutionary terror>" What's wrong with this definition? --Jiang 23:03, 15 Jan 2004 (UTC)

Well, many don't use the word "terrorist". Just do a Google search for "September 11 attacks". What's wrong with the definition is that it misses the fact that people only call those actions terrorism that they want to condemn and not those that they support. I wouldn't mind if we were to use your definition consistently, but I have a feeling you may be the first to protest when Israeli or U.S. actions were to be described as terrorist. --Wik 23:39, Jan 15, 2004 (UTC)

Sure many people don't use the word "terrorist", but more people do. I would like us to use a term commonly used elsewhere. Proof that the other name is common must be given.

Whenever a state's action is deemed "terrorist", we *should* acknowledge the claim that it is *state terrorism*. I find it only derogatory for states to be "terrorist" when they have armed forces at their disposal, removing the necessity to attack civilian targets to make their voice heard. Calling an organization "terrorist" only has negative connotations in that attacking and frightening civilians is wrong, not because the word is obscene or inaccurate. --Jiang 01:41, 16 Jan 2004 (UTC)

**Figure 22:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_2).

were, whether the article should use the term "terrorist" in its sub-title. This following excerpt from the discussion is indicative of certain users' arguments (Figure 22).

The discussion went on, focusing more on the use of the term "terrorist" in the sub-title of the article. It is interesting to note that, even though most involved editors believed that the attacks constituted acts of terrorism, there was uncertainty about whether the article should start by highlighting the terrorist nature of these events. As a result, a poll was created by the users concerning the use of the word "terrorist" in the sub-title of the article. Many users voted, and the result

of the poll suggested that the article should refer to the attacks as simply “September 11, 2001 attacks”.<sup>70</sup> Several users then clarified that this did not mean that the attacks were not terrorist acts, but that they did not believe it made any sense to begin the article in this way.<sup>71</sup> At the end of January 2004, the term “terrorist” was removed from the introductory sentence of the article.<sup>72</sup>

The debate did not end at this point, however; it continued over the next few months. Even though the sub-title remained in the form that the users had voted on, several other users also attempted to remove the term “terrorist” from the introductory section of the article. Other users then responded to that action by adding it in again.<sup>73</sup> On March 14, 2004, the user “KingTurtle” removed the term “terrorist” from the introduction and, the next day, the user “Cecropia” reversed this edit. As the users could not reach a consensus on this matter, they created a discussion thread on the “talk page” named “Deleting Terrorist”.<sup>74</sup> The following discussion then took place (Figure 23).

This is just a part of the discussion that followed, but it is representative of why the users could not reach consensus about the use of that term. Some editors were trying to follow the guidelines of Wikipedia about the NPOV, so for them the term “terrorist” was not neutral and signified a violation of the NPOV. For others, the 9/11 attacks were terrorist attacks, so the representation of this “truth” cannot be a POV. By the end of the discussion, the article continued to contain the term “terrorist” in its introductory description.

A few months later, in November 2004, the discussion about “terrorism” started again on the “talk page” and became more intense, when the user “Rebroad” edited the article and added the term “Freedom fighter” close to the term

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<sup>70</sup> “Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 3,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_3#Article\\_Title](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_3#Article_Title)

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> For how the article was at the end of January 2004, see “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=2290545](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=2290545) For the revision history of the article in January 2004, see “September 11 attacks: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&dir=prev&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&dir=prev&limit=500&action=history) and “September 11 attacks: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&dir=prev&offset=20040116211858%7C2168401&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&dir=prev&offset=20040116211858%7C2168401&limit=500&action=history)

<sup>73</sup> For the revision history of the article from January to March 2004, while these “edit wars” were taking place, see “September 11 attacks: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&dir=prev&offset=20040116211858%7C2168401&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&dir=prev&offset=20040116211858%7C2168401&limit=500&action=history)

<sup>74</sup> “Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 7,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_7](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_7)

## Deleting terrorist

I'm surprised at KingTurtle, an admin, removing the word "terrorist" from the description of the 9/11 attacks as POV. I don't even think the terrorists themselves think the attacks (at least the 3000 non-combatant civilians killed in the WTC attack) weren't terror attacks. What were they then. If these attacks aren't terrorist we should simply delete the entry under [terrorism](#) in Wikipedia, and give it a REDIRECT to [newspeak](#). *Cecropia* 00:28, 15 Mar 2004 (UTC)

I totally support your revert. If premeditated mass murder of innocent civilians isn't terrorism, nothing is. You are correct that Al Qaeda itself views 9/11 as terrorism-- a somehow justified terrorism. If KingTurtle wants to join them in sanctioning it he is free to do so, but he shouldn't turn language upside down in the process. *JDG* 02:11, 15 Mar 2004 (UTC)

The word terrorist was removed from the title of this article and it should be removed from the first paragraph of the article as well. The word terrorist is POV, IMHO. You ask me *what were they then* and my reply is they were attacks. Why do we need any adjective in front of the word "attacks"? The people working on the [terrorism](#) article can't come up with an easy definition of the term. The word is loaded with meanings and submeanings. *Kingturtle* 02:30, 15 Mar 2004 (UTC)

Therefore you think that maybe they weren't terrorist attacks? The fact isn't POV, only the label is. So you think a NPOV encyclopedia should avoid an obvious truth that some consider controversial—that's a POV in itself. For that matter calling it a "suicide" attack is POV and politically freighted. Death to the perpetrators was an "effect", not a motivation, as is true suicide. Why not call them a "homicide" attack as some do? As I said, *newspeak*. *Cecropia* 02:54, 15 Mar 2004 (UTC)

I concur, this is precisely the nonsense that I feared. Terrorist is not some evil word not to be uttered, and it mist be used in the articl. *Arno* 06:14, 15 Mar 2004 (UTC)

Placing a value-judgement adjective in front of a noun does not represent an obvious truth. There is no reason to place such an adjective. You won't believe it, but calling any attack a *terrorist* attack is *newspeak*. When asked why he supported the terrorist attacks of the *Contras*, *Ronald Reagan* said they weren't terrorists, they were freedom fighters. So we get to pick and choose which is which, depending on what side they are on. As I said, our fellow wikipedians cannot even come up with a fair definition on [terrorism](#). I'd rather call this article *9/11* - IMHO that is the most NPOV title we could have. *Kingturtle* 06:43, 15 Mar 2004 (UTC)

**Figure 23:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_7](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_7).

"terrorist".<sup>75</sup> Other editors soon reverted this edit, so the debate moved to the "talk page". "Rebroad" argued that if the editors of the article were to allow the use of the term "terrorist," they should also then use the term "Freedom fighters" to show all the different perspectives on the involved agents in this historical event.<sup>76</sup> In this way, "Rebroad" proposed, the article would then be in line with Wikipedia's NPOV policy. Several users reacted to this suggestion (Figure 24).

Among all these comments, one of the most intriguing was written by "JesseG," who offered a different perspective on why the term "Freedom fighters" should not have a place in the article and on the broader role of Wikipedia. This user suggested that if Wikipedians were not to use the term "terrorist" for the September 11 attacks, but were to use the term "Freedom fighters," they would be disrespecting the memory of the victims who had died in these attacks.<sup>77</sup> "JesseG" saw Wikipedia

<sup>75</sup> For the revision history of the article in November 2004, see "September 11 attacks: Revision history," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&offset=20050208032811%7C10054462&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&offset=20050208032811%7C10054462&limit=500&action=history) For the article after the edit by "Rebroad," see "September 11 attacks," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=7847793](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=7847793)

<sup>76</sup> "Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 11," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_11](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_11)

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

Terrorist in this instance is describing the attacks, which were unquestionably, methodologically, an act of terrorism. "Freedom fighter" is a POV label for the attackers themselves. One is factual, and the other is a point of view, and in any case not appropriate where you inserted it because it does not modify "people", it modifies "action". *Graft* 16:16, 25 Nov 2004 (UTC)

Thanks for your input. I think most people agree that both Terrorist and Freedom fighters are the same thing, but the phrases are opposing POV. They both have a cause, and the innocent people that die are victims as well as "collateral damage". Every act of harm can be viewed in this way. Every bomb. Every cause. It just requires you to look at it from a different perspective. For some people that can be quite hard to do. --*Rebroad* 19:16, 25 Nov 2004 (UTC)

[...]

Rebroad, please stop the vandalism of this article. You inserted this morning that it was a "terrorist/freedom fighter" attack. This article is returned as the first item on a Google search for "September 11, 2001 attacks": see [2] You make Wikipedia look stupid with edits like that. I could understand the strong feelings if this was some kind of borderline incident, but it was an anonymous attack intended to kill thousands of non-combatants (using other civilians are weapons!) in order to spread fear throughout America and many other parts of the world. It was the Platonic form of terrorism. *Slim* 13:21, Nov 26, 2004 (UTC)

**Figure 24:** Screenshots of discussion, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_11](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_11).

as a virtual “site of memory,” in which editors should not only write about what happened in the past but also pay respect to the victims of that past.<sup>78</sup> For this reason, Wikipedia articles are significant for the users because they are not only pages containing information about the past, but also determine how the readers will remember that past. At the same time, the guidelines and policies of Wikipedia enhance a non-emotional understanding of the past and promote the neutrality of historical knowledge. Therefore, the user “WhisperToMe,” an experienced editor and one of the top contributors to the article, replied to “JesseG” stressing that Wikipedia was an encyclopedia, not a memorial site, and should comply with the NPOV policy.<sup>79</sup> This is the main challenge for Wikipedia users: to write about history by sharing their personal experiences and understandings of history, but also to try to follow all the existing policies that Wikipedia has established. The debate effectively ended here, though a few more discussion threads did appear over the following years. As of today, the current version of the September 11 attacks article includes the term “terrorist,” not in its sub-title, but in its introductory description.<sup>80</sup>

The contemporary nature and traumatic character of the September 11 attacks has resulted in many users seeing the related Wikipedia article as a memory site, in which the involved editors can honor the victims. For example,

<sup>78</sup> For the term “site of memory,” see Wolff, “The Historian’s Craft, Popular Memory, and Wikipedia,” 66. The term comes from the work of Pierre Nora: see Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire”.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* For the top editors of the article, see “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/September\\_11\\_attacks](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/September_11_attacks) For the profile page of the user “WhisperToMe,” see “User:WhisperToMe,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:WhisperToMe>

<sup>80</sup> See “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September\\_11\\_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks)

on September 11, 2011, the third anniversary of the attacks, the user “Rickyrab” created a discussion thread titled “In Memorium” on the “talk page” and wrote the following:

To the about three thousand folks, sixteen palm trees (in the Winter Garden), countless other living things, etc., that perished on 9/11/2001, I dedicate this section in your memory. Amen.<sup>81</sup>

This user, who is a “Veteran Editor” of Wikipedia and is from New York, viewed Wikipedia as a space in which Wikipedians could not only write about what happened but also commemorate the memory of those who died during the 9/11 attacks.<sup>82</sup>

During the same period, some editors started to demand the inclusion of more memorial material within the article itself. In 2004, the main article did not have any section on the existing memorials, only some hyperlinks to other online memorial sites and to the article “Memorials and services for the September 11 attacks,” which contained lists of the existing memorials dedicated to the victims.<sup>83</sup> The editors, however, perceived a lack of relevant material on the main page; and, as a result, in the same year, a discussion thread titled “Memorials” appeared on the “talk page”.<sup>84</sup> In this discussion thread, the user “Ground broken” proposed the inclusion of more material relating to the various memorials in the main article. Specifically, “Ground broken” urged other users to consider all the memorials that currently existed in the communities close to Manhattan and to include references to them in the main article.<sup>85</sup> However, this post did not appear to attract the attention of many users, so the discussion ended there.

One year later, some users started to edit the article and added a section on the memorials for the victims.<sup>86</sup> This section included information on the existing

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<sup>81</sup> “Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 13,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_13#In\\_Memorium](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_13#In_Memorium)

<sup>82</sup> For the profile of the user, see “User:Rickyrab,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Rickyrab>

<sup>83</sup> For the version of the article “September 11 attacks” in September 2004, see “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=5813754](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=5813754) For the separate article on memorials, see “Memorials and services for the September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorials\\_and\\_services\\_for\\_the\\_September\\_11\\_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorials_and_services_for_the_September_11_attacks)

<sup>84</sup> “Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 13”.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> For the revision history of the article between September and November 2005, see “September 11 attacks: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&offset=20051106013913%7C27492931&limit=500&action=](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&offset=20051106013913%7C27492931&limit=500&action=)



memorials, such as America's Heroes Memorial within the Pentagon, but also planned memorials, such as the outdoor Pentagon Memorial and the World Trade Center site.<sup>87</sup> The editors were then constantly adding more and more information to this section. Nevertheless, in September 2006, a user asked on the "talk page" if Wikipedia administrators had any plan to "make a memorial page for the events of that tragic day".<sup>88</sup> One user, "Goldbez," one of the top editors of the article, replied that "there is already one," which was a reference to a memorial wiki focused on the 9/11 attacks that did also exist at that time but has now been permanently removed.<sup>89</sup> An interesting comment soon followed that post, where the user "Nymichael" mentioned:

Living at 8th St & Broadway, highest point between Empire State Building and WTC, photos we took from the rooftop, Ground Zero, Union Square and Washington Sq Park are at newyorkpix.com, added the link for a first hand view from the frozen zone.<sup>90</sup>

This user was willing to share their own photographs, which they had taken from their house close to the site of the 9/11 attacks, and, in this way, to contribute to a better representation of the topic in the main article. However, the discussion did not continue.

In July 2007, a related discussion appeared when the user "Haemo," another top editor of the article, wrote on the "talk page" that the section on memorials needed more pictures, as the topic felt incomplete and not particularly well-covered.<sup>91</sup> This user cited some pictures that depicted the Tribute in Light, and asked the other involved editors for their opinions on which pictures should be placed into the main article.<sup>92</sup> "Haemo" also removed a picture of the World

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history For the first version of the article after the edit, see "September 11 attacks," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=23380500#Memorials](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=23380500#Memorials)

<sup>87</sup> For example, see the version of the article on January 3, 2006, "September 11 attacks," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=33679603#Memorials](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=33679603#Memorials)

<sup>88</sup> "Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 21," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_21#Memorial](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_21#Memorial)

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* For the top editors of the article, see "September 11 attacks," accessed February 14, 2021, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/September\\_11\\_attacks](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/September_11_attacks) For the 9/11. On the memorial wiki and why it has been permanently removed, see Keegan, "A History of Newswork on Wikipedia," 1–10; "Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 21".

<sup>90</sup> "Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 21".

<sup>91</sup> "Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 31," *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_31](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_31)

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

Trade Center Cross because, they claimed, it was not a memorial.<sup>93</sup> Instead, “Haemo” suggested a picture of the America’s Heroes Memorial. To this another user, “Aude,” a significant contributor to the article, replied.<sup>94</sup> The following discussion then took place (Figure 25).

#### Actual editing - "Memorials" section




Image A

I've re-written the memorials section, since it seemed a bit lacking. It can be more thoroughly sourced, and I intended to do that at a later date, but I don't believe any of the information is contentious. I would, however, like to talk about how to improve it. We have two options for the "Tribute in Light" picture, A or B. Personally, I like B, but it seems a lot of people like A more. We also definitely need another image; there were two other ones, which I removed - the first, because the [World Trade Center Cross](#) is not a memorial, and the second because it was too large. The America's Heroes Memorial might be a good choice, but I'm open to other options too. --Haemo 06:47, 21 July 2007 (UTC)



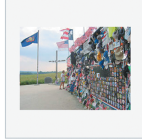


Image B

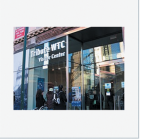


America's Heroes Memorial

Excellent work. Possibly, the section could stand to be shorter with details in the subarticle. But, the subarticle is a mess now and is in serious need of work. Things to note in the section and/or subarticle (1) there's a temporary Flight 93 memorial [Added] (2) last September, the Tribute WTC 9/11 Visitor Center opened. [6] [6](#) [6](#) The center includes exhibits, and they organize guided tours (3) The WTC Memorial Foundation organized the "9/11 and the American Landscape: Photographs by Jonathan Hyman" exhibition in [7 World Trade Center](#) last September/October. [7] [7](#) [7](#) (4) I don't have a source for it right now, but a lot of progress has been made in construction of the outdoor memorial at the Pentagon. I don't think it's officially scheduled to be complete until next year, but think it will be finished sooner. It's not easy to get a photo of the memorial construction, but maybe. I have uploaded a couple more photos for the subarticle, but I'm fine with using the America's Heroes Memorial photo here. --Aude (talk) 14:42, 21 July 2007 (UTC)



Flight 93 temporary memorial



Tribute WTC 9/11 Visitor Center

**Figure 25:** Screenshot of discussion, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_31](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_31).

Thus, “Haemo” added a photo of the Flight 93 temporary memorial to the relevant section and removed a photo placed by the user “John Manuel,” which showed a memorial from Jersey City facing the former location of the Twin Towers.<sup>95</sup> However, that edit provoked a reaction from “John Manuel,” who argued:

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> For the revision history of the article in July 2007, see “September 11 attacks: Revision history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&offset=20071031213143%7C168382204&limit=500&action=history](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&offset=20071031213143%7C168382204&limit=500&action=history) For the version of the article with the photo of “John Manuel,” see “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=145783292#Memorials](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=145783292#Memorials) For the version of the article after the edit by “Haemo,” see “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=146636871#Memorials](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=146636871#Memorials)

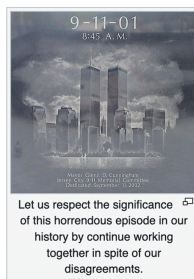
To give the respect to the victims, survivors and to the significance, that is increasing with the past of time, we need to add a gallery to this article, in which it can be “portrayed”, the different memorials, all of them are very important and deserve to be mentioned and their picture shown in this page.<sup>96</sup>

It is very interesting to note that “John Manuel” perceived the editing process as a practice that should “give respect to the victims [and] survivors” of the 9/11 attacks, and, for this reason, goes on to argue that all existing memorials should be referenced on the page. Nevertheless, the user “Haemo” offered a different perspective on the existence of so many pictures in the article, as well as their more appropriate placement in the separate Wikipedia article “Memorials and services for the September 11 attacks,” which is devoted to that specific thematic area. “Haemo” wrote:

Any gallery would be on the September 11, 2001 attack memorials and services subpage, not this one. The image you keep re-adding is not exactly appropriate for this page – it’s of a minor, non-permanent memorial which is not mentioned in the article. This page already has too many pictures, and three in that small space is too many. I know you like the image, because you took it, and it’s a nice picture, but this isn’t the right place for it.<sup>97</sup>

The user “John Manuel” replied (Figure 26).

It is not only that is nice, it is substantial because shows where once the tower were. Those flags and every single item belongs to that catastrophe. Probably, you sought this from TV, I was there, right in Manhattan and I experienced and lost friends who had children which I played with in the park. The photo, means the whole a lot for many people. I observe that you has put another photo, it is OK. The section is about "Memorials" and this photo reminds the reader exactly of the location of the towers. We are in disagreement at this point. It is OK too. Your POV is respected, it doesn't mean that we should follow it. I suggest to cool it off for a while and then comeback to this point. If the article has "too much" photos then as in the [WP:MOS](#) (Which it doesn't explicitly states how much is too much) a gallery is recommended. Another photo that can be included is this:



Remember, let time talk to us, well greetings, and happy editing [John Manuel-14:19, 23 July 2007 \(UTC\)](#)

**Figure 26:** Screenshot of comment, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September\\_11\\_attacks/Archive\\_31](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks/Archive_31).

<sup>96</sup> “Talk:September 11 attacks/Archive 31”.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

“John Manuel” shared again their personal experience, the fact that they lived in Manhattan and had lost friends in the attacks. For “John Manuel” the photos of memorials constituted a sign of honor to the victims of 9/11. The discussion did not go much further, as the user “Haemo” disagreed with the points raised. “Haemo” argued that they “don’t need more photos of memorials” and that the images already included were representative enough of the 9/11 attacks.<sup>98</sup> “John Manuel” replied again:

Haemo, thank you for explaining your reasons, it is fine to disagree; [ . . . ] Do you think that knowing and experiencing the pain of the disappearance of one of my friends who left his two children and wife alone forever, it is also “silly”? Now, about your temporal statement. No matter who long will pass this will remain in my soul, I have never cope nor I will be able to. [ . . . ] You and nobody will change that. The view is explicit, see again the photo of the plaque and you will perhaps understand why that view will be forever in our memories. At least of those who experienced at first hand the horrible event. [ . . . ] You probably will need to excuse me, because incidentally, for me this is not silly at all. It is a strong remembrance not only of that event but the responsibilities ahead and the almost complete change of the world order. Now, you seem a little obsessed with this, as I suggested to you let the time flow; there are other issues to improve in Wikipedia I am sure you know. Thank you again for your response but I disagree with you, with my cognitive and emotional will. Have an enjoyable editing time.<sup>99</sup>

“John Manuel” expressed their strong disagreement with “Haemo” by pointing to their emotional bond with this historical event and the responsibilities that Wikipedia users have to the victims of such attacks. These responsibilities do not only relate to the past but also to the future; and, namely, in relation to how the September 11 attacks are to be represented on Wikipedia. The representation of this historical event on the site will, ultimately, determine what readers of Wikipedia learn about it.

“Haemo” continued this debate by arguing that Wikipedia is not a memorial site, but an encyclopedia, so emotions should not have any place in the article. They argued:

You seem a little bit too emotionally invested in this to edit an encyclopedia article about this – perhaps you should try contributing to some of the memorial Wikis that exist online. I can’t say anything about your personal pain, your memories, or what you feel about the events. However, from an encyclopedic perspective, they’re not exactly relevant here. Wikipedia is not a memorial; your reasons for keeping this image might be very important to you, but from an encyclopedic perspective they are not appropriate or productive.<sup>100</sup>

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98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

To which “John Manuel” replied:

That is according to Haemo’s views, correct? I ask you for waiting but you couldn’t do this. Why can’t you? because you are emotionally invested truly in this too. Thats [sic] is why you recurrently come here, the other case is because you have other motives rather than contribute to this encyclopedia, I challenge you as you have done above, to go to other wikis or other pages and leave this up to other users. I bet you cannot because you are too involved on this subject for some reason. I tell you what you could do, go edit some art articles. It will give you a fresh start. However if you want to state here then do not judge anybody’s motivations. Are you an overseer? Judge? Well in here you are an editor? Let go to your peer-review. You will learn eventually to do this in here. I promise.<sup>101</sup>

The debate between these two editors focused more on their emotional motives when it came to their engagement with the article. “Haemo” criticized “John Manuel” for being “too emotionally invested” in the topic, concluding that their edits were not appropriate nor neutral. On the other hand, “John Manuel” argued that their affective motives and personal experience of the 9/11 attacks should not undermine their contributions. Instead, they suggest, the role of the editor should be to commemorate the victims of these attacks.

The debate continued, as more users intervened in the discussion and supported the idea proposed by “Haemo” about including more pictures in the other article, “Memorials and services for the September 11 attacks”.<sup>102</sup> While this discussion was taking place on the “talk page,” the users “Aude,” “Haemo,” and “John Manuel” were all editing the article by adding and removing pictures.<sup>103</sup> At the end of July and for the next few months, the section on memorials included only the image of “The Tribute in Light”.<sup>104</sup> The current version of the section still contains this image but another has also now been added, depicting “The Last Column” being removed from the World Trade Center site and displayed at the 9/11 Museum.<sup>105</sup>

The examples above reveal the complexity of writing about and representing the September 11 attacks on Wikipedia. Many users are emotionally engaged with these traumatic historical events and view editing as a means to commemorate the past and the memories of the victims. Wikipedia users are affected by the presence

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**101** Ibid.

**102** Ibid.

**103** “September 11 attacks: Revision history”.

**104** For the version of the article at the end of July 2007, see “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September\\_11\\_attacks&oldid=147909121#Memorials](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=147909121#Memorials)

**105** See “September 11 attacks,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 14, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September\\_11\\_attacks#Memorials](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks#Memorials)

of the past, and as the philosopher of history, Eelco Runia, has put it, we should not be afraid of having “ourselves affected by the past”.<sup>106</sup> For Runia, it is very difficult to be affected by the presence of the past.<sup>107</sup> As he has explained, it is not the story itself that causes the presence of the past but the different ways in which the past affects and forces someone to rewrite the story about themselves or about a nation.<sup>108</sup> Wikipedia users are affected and “moved by the past” because they are enabled by Wikipedia to think and write about history, and to agree or disagree about how a historical event should be represented in its main articles. This is also what the historian Jörn Rüsen has highlighted. For Rüsen, emotions play a fundamental role in how we make sense of the past and, more importantly, in how we try to historicize the past.<sup>109</sup> Emotions help us perceive the past as something that needs interpretation, and in this way the past can become historical knowledge.<sup>110</sup> This is how Wikipedia users try to approach the September 11 attacks and produce historical knowledge. The traumatic nature of the past is present all throughout Wikipedia discussions and forces users to think about, write, and re-write the September 11 attacks.

However, Wikipedians’ memories and personal experiences from the past remain only on the “talk pages” and do not determine the representation of the event within the main article. As Brian Keegan has mentioned in his study on how Wikipedia responded to the 9/11 attacks, Wikipedia managed to exclude much 9/11 memorial-related content on the grounds that it was “unencyclopedic”.<sup>111</sup> In 2003 the Wikimedia Foundation hosted the Memorial Wiki Project that aimed to provide more information on the personal experiences and memorials related to the 9/11 attacks.<sup>112</sup> However, for several users, the purpose of this project was ahistorical, non-NPOV, and far too personal.<sup>113</sup> Thus, in 2005 the project became inactive and eventually closed.<sup>114</sup> The same approach could be said to characterize the main Wikipedia article on the 9/11 attacks. Many editors argued that they should include memorial pages for each separate victim, by adding in-

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106 Runia, *Moved by the Past*, 88–9.

107 *Ibid.*, 92.

108 *Ibid.*, 93.

109 Jörn Rüsen, “Emotional Forces in Historical Thinking: Some Metahistorical Reflections and the Case of Mourning,” *Historien* 8 (2009): 41–53.

110 *Ibid.*, 44.

111 Keegan, “A History of Newswork on Wikipedia,” 1.

112 *Ibid.*, 3.

113 *Ibid.*

114 *Ibid.*

formation about those individuals' personal experiences, but Wikipedia privileged its own encyclopedic character over any commemorative function.<sup>115</sup>

Keegan's general point is confirmed in the examples mentioned above. However, this should not allow us to underestimate Wikipedia users' engagement with history. The main article, which is the final product of the writing and editing process, is still constantly being debated, discussed, and negotiated. The engagement of Wikipedians with the September 11 attacks is more personal and emotional than what we have encountered in the other three case studies.<sup>116</sup> Though Wikipedians' memories and experiences of the 9/11 attacks remain strictly confined to the "talk page," they reveal important information about how users approach the past and aim to reconstruct it. In addition to this, even if a user does not ultimately succeed in changing the final written product, that user can still begin a discussion thread on the topic and all of their comments can at least be part of the wider conversation on the "talk page". In this way, even if their contributions do not change the content of the main article, they can open a window for further discussion, debate, and a reexamination of the past. Thus, Wikipedia users can see themselves as part of the broader editing process on Wikipedia.<sup>117</sup>

## History in constant motion: From the distant to the recent past

The four case studies reveal the different ways that Wikipedia users approach the past when they write about history. Wikipedians do not contribute to the production of historical knowledge by compiling more and more information, as traditional encyclopedias used to do, but engage with the past in multiple different ways, by conducting their own (secondary) research, reading books, searching for historical information on the web, visiting museums and historical sites, participating in historical events, and sharing their personal perspectives about history. In all case studies, we can detect some of those methods when it comes to the production of history. However, there do remain significant differences between

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115 Ibid., 6.

116 On the engagement of Americans with the "national trauma" of the September 11 attacks, see Marita Sturken, *Memory, Kitch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

117 Nina Simon describes a similar experience in a participatory museum's exhibition: see Nina Simon, "Participatory Design and the Future of Museums," in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 24–5.

the case studies examined so far. In the “talk pages” of the Great Depression and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Wikipedians’ engagement with academic scholarship determines much of the discussion about history, while their personal memories and experiences are naturally limited and play a lesser role. On the other hand, in the main articles on both the Vietnam War and the September 11 attacks, personal experiences and memories play a pivotal role in the discussions and serve to shape Wikipedians’ contributions.

This does not mean, of course, that the articles on the Vietnam War and September 11 attacks are simply products of personal reflection on history. Even these two case studies are a blend of dialogue, compliance with the relevant guidelines, engagement with academic works and popular historical forms, personal experiences and memories of the past. This is because Wikipedians’ personal reflections on the past do not stand alone. They confront the policy of NPOV, which often causes further discussions and debates on how historical knowledge should be represented on Wikipedia. Even though Wikipedia users are “touched” or “affected” by the recent past, they try to present a balanced historical narrative that will shed light on all related aspects of the past.<sup>118</sup> Many Wikipedia users share their own interpretations of a historical event on the “talk page” of the relevant article, but their contributions do not necessarily result in the editing of the main piece. This does not mean that their comments are not important. Instead, their comments reveal how Wikipedians perceive the past, how they try to approach it, what information they want to include or exclude in the article, and what visual elements they believe should be added or removed. In this process, the determinant factor is the users’ relation to history. For the distant past (the “zamani”), Wikipedians’ engagement is far more academic and scientific, while for the recent past (the “sasha”) they tend to express their memories and historical understandings more freely. These two different types of the past determine how Wikipedians make “sense of history”.<sup>119</sup>

In 1951, the novelist William Faulkner wrote the famous phrase: “The past is never dead. It is not even the past”.<sup>120</sup> On Wikipedia, the past is not dead, is not even the past, because it is in constant motion, it always changes, it includes and excludes historical information. The past moves from the recent present to the distant past, from the “sasha” to “zamani”. That movement also changes the way a historical event is represented on Wikipedia. Does this happen only on Wikipedia? Definitely not. It is part of the epistemology of historical scholarship. But on

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<sup>118</sup> For the term “touched by the past,” see Landsberg, *Engaging the Past*, 10. For the term “affected by the past,” see Runia, *Moved by the Past*, 88–9.

<sup>119</sup> For the term “sense of history,” see Glassberg, *Sense of History*, 6.

<sup>120</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).



Wikipedia, the motion of history is visible, we not only see the final historical product, which is never truly final as it constantly changes, but the whole process behind it. We see what happens in the forefront of historical knowledge production, in the main article, and what happens in the backstage, on the “talk pages”. We can track the history of a historical article and what changes haven taken place. Were these changes the result of a broader consensus or an “edit war?” Were they the result of Wikipedia guidelines or personal engagement with the past? How do editors make sense of the past while they try to contribute to the production of historical knowledge? Wikipedia “talk pages” shed light on these questions and reveal all the levels of the users’ engagement with history. As Roy Rosenzweig has put it, the success of Wikipedia does not lie in the accuracy of its published content at any one time but in its ability to edit its contents constantly.<sup>121</sup> Wikipedia articles are in constant state of change. As Rosenzweig notes, Wikipedia looks like a first draft of history but is open to constant revisions.<sup>122</sup>

By whom is history set in motion? By “a bunch of nobodies,” to borrow a phrase from Andrew Lih.<sup>123</sup> All Wikipedia users, some of whom have been mentioned above, share their authority about history and contribute to the production of historical knowledge. Many of them share their opinions and arguments about history in the discussion threads, but few of them manage to edit any main articles or, therefore, change the representation of a given historical event on Wikipedia. The discussions on the “talk pages” move far faster than the editing process of the main article. This is logical to a certain extent, as the “talk pages” offer space for discussion and debate, a part of which can then end up in the main entry. However, all the involved users manage to share their authority to some extent, whether this is on the “talk page” or in the main article itself. Wikipedia embodies what Michael Frisch has termed “shared authority,” an influential concept in public history.<sup>124</sup> Frisch called upon oral and public historians to not just extract knowledge from the public or to simply communicate historical knowledge to the public.<sup>125</sup> Instead, Frisch championed the development of a dialogue between the historian and the public, which would advance a democratized shared historical consciousness and encourage more participation in debates about history.<sup>126</sup> Do we notice that on Wikipedia? Yes, I think. Wikipedia users,

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121 Rosenzweig, “Wikipedia: Can History Be Open Source?” 135, cited in Niederer and van Dijck, “Wisdom of the Crowd or technicity of the content?” 1375.

122 Rosenzweig, “Wikipedia: Can History Be Open Source?” 136.

123 Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*.

124 Frisch, *A Shared Authority*.

125 *Ibid.*, xxii.

126 *Ibid.*

even if they have a historical education or just an interest in history, collaborate, agree, and disagree on various matters to produce historical knowledge. Nevertheless, Wikipedia users do not base their contributions only on their own personal memories, as Robert Wolff has argued, but on a combination of different things: memories, experiences, political beliefs, academic works, and historical information available on the Web.<sup>127</sup> The way Wikipedians engage with history depends on the relative position of a given historical event in the lives of the editors involved; in other words, the extent to which Wikipedians have developed lived experiences and memories from the past. The more recent the past is, the more personal the reflections of Wikipedians are.

Michael Frisch also made another significant point. He argued that historical authority should no longer serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy.<sup>128</sup> On Wikipedia, the authority is not the academic historian, whom Frisch seemingly had in mind when he wrote his book, but anyone with an interest in history or in the topic of a particular article. This does not mean that on Wikipedia there are no power structures or forms of hierarchy that determine the nature of historical knowledge. On the contrary, these structures explain how the engagement with history on the “talk pages” can result in editing changes in the main article. The only way to reveal these structures of power is to shed some light on the profile pages of the Wikipedia users themselves. Thus, we will better understand which users make most edits in an article, who these users are, and what are their main characteristics. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>127</sup> Wolff, “The Historian’s Craft, Popular Memory, and Wikipedia,” 66.

<sup>128</sup> Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, xx.

# Chapter 4

## A Network Analysis of Wikipedia Editors’ Engagement with History: Interests, Identities, Power, and Hierarchy

The English Wikipedia constitutes a huge project that includes a million articles written by millions of editors.<sup>1</sup> It would be impossible to understand and explore how Wikipedians produce historical knowledge without examining Wikipedia on a large scale. In this chapter, I experiment with network analysis and study Wikipedia as a network of interactions between editors and pages. My goal is to investigate the characteristics of Wikipedia users who contribute to pages related to history, the volume of edits they make, their interests, experiences, and education, which prompts them to take part in the Wikipedia community and to produce historical knowledge. As the media scholar José van Dijck has argued, Wikipedia’s success lies in the fact that it can mobilize different types of users to contribute to its contents.<sup>2</sup> What are the characteristics of those users and how are their characteristics related to their engagement with history? By conducting a network analysis of Wikipedians who edit historical articles, I detect repeating patterns that reveal why Wikipedia editors decide to contribute to pages related to history and what characteristics these editors have.<sup>3</sup> If we assume that each Wikipedia page is a network in which several editors participate, is it a balanced and symmetrical network? Or are there a few users who monopolize both the cre-

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1 “English Wikipedia,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Wikipedia)

2 van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 136.

3 For the use of networks in the humanities, see Ahnert, et al., *The Network Turn*; David Easley and Jon Kleinberg, ed., *Networks, Crowds, and Markets: Reasoning About a Highly Connected World* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Roberto Franzosi and John W. Mohr, “New Directions in Formalization and Historical Analysis,” *Theory and Society* 26, nos. 2–3 (1997): 133–60. For some examples of network analysis in the humanities, see Ruth Ahnert and Sebastian Ahnert, “Protestant Letter Networks in the Reign of Mary I: A Quantitative Approach,” *English Literary History* 82, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 1–33; Ruth Ahnert, “Maps Versus Networks,” in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (Brill Open E-Book Collection, 2016), 130–57; Roberto Franzosi, Gianluca De Fazio, and Stefania Vicari, “Ways of Measuring Agency: An Application of Quantitative Narrative Analysis to Lynchings in Georgia (1875–1930),” *Sociological Methodology* 42 (August 2012): 1–42; Shin-Kap Han, “The Other Ride of Paul Revere: The Brokerage Role in the Making of the American Revolution,” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (2009): 143–62.

ation and editing of historical articles? As the philosopher Bruno Latour has put it, networks can shed light on how a group of people or community is formulated; they reveal the common things and elements that contribute to the formation of a group.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I argue that the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia is produced through power and hierarchy. By studying multiple Wikipedia pages as networks, I explore the interests of Wikipedia editors, who engage with articles related to history, and their identities as they are promoted within the Wikipedia community. At the same time, by examining the number of edits Wikipedians make and the centrality of Wikipedia editors within a network, I argue that the most experienced editors and some non-human agents define the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia to a significant extent.

To answer these questions, I have selected three categories related to modern United States history: “History of organizations based in the United States,” “History of science and technology in the United States,” and “LGBT history in the United States.”<sup>5</sup> All three categories belong to the WikiProject United States, a collaborative project of Wikipedians who aim to improve coverage of topics related to the United States, such as culture, economy, geography, health, history, etc.<sup>6</sup> Rather than choosing random Wikipedia pages related to modern US history, I have opted to follow the structure and logic of how Wikipedia itself organizes its topic pages by category. Each category consists of multiple pages, forming an organic collective of loosely affiliated pages. I view each category as an actual network of editors. The category “History of organizations based in the United States” includes twenty-two pages, the category “History of science and technology in the United States” has forty-nine pages, and the category “LGBT history in the United States” has seventy-one pages. All three categories represent completely different research interests and fields of history and, thus, I can better detect similarities and differences in Wikipedia editors’ engagement with history.

The topics of the pages of each category vary significantly. The category “History of organizations based in the United States” includes pages that range from

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4 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

5 For the three categories, see “Category:History of organizations based in the United States,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:History\\_of\\_organizations\\_based\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:History_of_organizations_based_in_the_United_States); “Category:History of science and technology in the United States,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:History\\_of\\_science\\_and\\_technology\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:History_of_science_and_technology_in_the_United_States); “Category:LGBT history in the United States,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:LGBT\\_history\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:LGBT_history_in_the_United_States)

6 For the WikiProject United States, see “Wikipedia:WikiProject United States,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_United_States)

the “History of the Industrial Workers of the World” and “History of the Democratic Party” to the “History of the San Francisco Police Department” and “History of the Alcoholics Anonymous”.<sup>7</sup> The category “History of science and technology in the United States” consists of pages such as “Technological and industrial history of the United States,” “The Machine in the Garden,” and “Electro-Dynamic Light Company”.<sup>8</sup> The last category has pages that range from “Gay pride” and “LGBT culture in Philadelphia” to “Larry Craig scandal” and “International Pronouns Day”.<sup>9</sup> So, many of these pages are often loosely connected with each other thematically, but this is just how Wikipedia has chosen to categorize its contents related to modern United States history.

In each category, I have extracted the names of the top twenty editors for each page and the number of edits they have made to each page. I extracted only the names of the top twenty editors because, in the “page statistics” portal, Wikipedia displays only the top twenty editors in the foreground of each page – if someone wants to find out about the rest of the editors, they need to click on “others”.<sup>10</sup> The top editors are identified by the number of edits they have made to each page and should not be confused with the top authors, who are measured by character count. The process for gathering this data was done automatically by using a script, which extracted the details of the top twenty editors for every page as well as the total number of edits made by each one.<sup>11</sup> Then, I manually assigned attributes to each Wikipedia editor by visiting their profile pages.<sup>12</sup> That process could not take place automatically, as the profile pages required close reading and interpretation. For example, to understand which topics these editors were interested in on Wikipedia, it would often require a close reading of a few paragraphs that the editors had included within their own profile pages. Therefore, according to the available information on these profile pages, I collected data on each editor’s education, interests, and experience. Specifically, I exam-

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7 “Category:History of organizations based in the United States”.

8 “Category:History of science and technology in the United States”.

9 “Category:LGBT history in the United States”.

10 For example, see the “page statistics” of any Wikipedia page: “Science and technology in the United States,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Science\\_and\\_technology\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States#top-editors](https://xtools.wmflabs.org/articleinfo/en.wikipedia.org/Science_and_technology_in_the_United_States#top-editors)

11 By creating a script written in the Python programming language, I automatically scraped the names of the top twenty editors and the number of their edits from all pages of each Wikipedia category. For example, I applied the script to the category “History of organizations based in the United States” and it imported the names of the relevant top twenty editors and the number of their edits from each Wikipedia page that belongs to this category.

12 For example, see the profile page of the user “Settler,” “User:Settler,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Settler>

ined if they had any educational background, such as an undergraduate or graduate degree in history, if they were interested in history as a subject of knowledge, if they were interested in the general topic they had chosen to edit, such as science, technology, LGBTQ, or the specific topic of the article itself, and if they were experienced users. As Wikipedia does not include any information on what distinguishes an experienced user from an inexperienced one, I decided to set my own criteria for what constitutes an experienced user: this was either the editing of at least ten different articles, or having been the recipient of any barnstars or other editing awards by the Wikipedia community. In addition, I extracted information about editors' experiences and interests from the "view history" portal of each profile page, which details the past activities of editors on Wikipedia.<sup>13</sup> For example, if an editor was making constant contributions to articles related to history, they were marked as experienced and interested in history editors for the purposes of the network analysis.

On their profile pages, some editors mentioned the reasons why they got involved on Wikipedia, their studies, interests, their awards for their contributions, how long they had been participating on Wikipedia, and even some more personal information. However, many editors did not include any information about their lives, activities, or interests, even if they had contributed to multiple pages. Some of them were also banned from Wikipedia, so there was no available information about their role or activities within the community. Wikipedia defines its bans as "formal prohibition from editing some or all Wikipedia pages, or a formal prohibition from making certain types of edits on Wikipedia pages".<sup>14</sup> Bans can have a specific or unspecified duration.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, this lack of information prevents us from having a complete picture of all editors' characteristics. On the other hand, the available data reveals the frequency with which Wikipedia editors appear within a certain category, their position within this category, the number of edits they have made, and their relation to history and the broader thematic topic they have chosen to edit. Once I had collected all the relevant data and assigned attributes to the various editors (interest in history, interest in the specific topic, education in history, experience, etc.), I imported this data to Gephi, a visualization and exploration software for graphs and networks.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see "User:Settler: Revision history," *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=User:Settler&action=history>

<sup>14</sup> "Wikipedia:Banning policy," *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Banning\\_policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Banning_policy)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> On Gephi and its usage for network analysis, see Ahnert, et al., *The Network Turn*, 64.

In the Wikipedia community, there are editors and pages, while in networks there are nodes and edges. A network is a “set of relationships between objects or entities”.<sup>17</sup> Nodes are groups of objects or entities, and their relationships are edges.<sup>18</sup> In this study, Wikipedia editors will be the nodes and the connections between the editors, who contribute to the creation and development of a Wikipedia page, are the edges. In other words, the edges represent a connection of one editor with another editor, and this connection is established by the fact they both edited the same page. Measuring the connections between Wikipedia editors helps us understand the number of edits these editors have made to each page, the importance of specific individuals, and lets us identify who are the most active and well-connected editors within a given network. As Ruth Ahnert and Sebastien Ahnert explain in their study on networks: “A network is a collection of links, which can be combined into a myriad of possible paths. The measurement of these paths is a crucial way of establishing the ranked importance of the people in that network”.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, network analysis is also political, it reveals the dynamics of power.<sup>20</sup> In the case study of Wikipedia, some experienced editors are responsible for making the most contributions to Wikipedia articles, and some non-human agents have the highest numbers of connections within a Wikipedia network, and, therefore, determine the production of historical knowledge.

## Exploring Wikipedia editors’ interests and identities

Each Wikipedia page constitutes a network with nodes and edges and each page is part of a broader network of a Wikipedia category. In this study, I have named each category as a category-network and the involved Wikipedia pages as pages-networks. The aim of this section is to explore the different factors and various interests that motivate Wikipedia editors to engage with the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia. By examining three different historical categories on Wikipedia and multiple Wikipedia pages, I was able to identify the types of interests held by Wikipedians, who write historical articles, and which encourage

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17 Ahnert, “Maps Versus Networks,” 131.

18 Ibid. On networks and their characteristics, see Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), 213; Scott B. Weingart, “Demystifying Networks,” *The Scottbot Irregular*, accessed December 1, 2021, <http://www.scottbot.net/HIAL/index.html@p=6279.html>; Elijah Meeks, “More Networks in the Humanities or Did books have DNA?” *Digital Humanities Specialist*, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://dhs.stanford.edu/visualization/more-networks/>

19 Ahnert and Ahnert, “Protestant Letter Networks,” 12.

20 Ahnert, et al., *The Network Turn*, 40.

them to produce historical knowledge. In turn, these interests offer valuable insight into the respective identities of the Wikipedia editors in question, and how they choose to promote themselves within the Wikipedia community.<sup>21</sup> The main argument of this section is that these Wikipedia users, who edit articles related to history, identify themselves more with the specific topic they edit rather than with history as a general field or category of interest. At the same time, any formal education in history, which these Wikipedians may or may not have received, does not play any role in their engagement with articles related to history.

Figure 27 (see below) is a visualized network of the Wikipedia category “History of organizations based in the United States”. This category includes twenty-two pages-networks. The visualization of networks is always the result of specific choices and assumptions. The network in Figure 27 emphasizes the nodes-editors with the highest number of edits within the category. The bigger the node, the higher the number of edits the node has made. Same for the color. The lighter the blue of the node, the higher the number of edits the node has made, and vice versa. As can be seen in the network, not all editors make an equal number of contributions within the category. There are significant differences in the number of edits Wikipedians make. Even if we zoom in on the network and scrutinize a particular page-network more closely (Figures 28 and 29), we notice that some of the involved users have made a higher proportion of contributions than other editors.<sup>22</sup> In this section, I identify the editors with the highest numbers of edits, their interests and identities that encourage them to produce historical knowledge, and finally their centrality within each category-network.

By looking again at the broader category-network (Figure 27), three editors are the top editors of the category. The users “Rjensen,” “Settler,” and “Richard Myers” appear to be the editors with the most contributions, with more than two hundred edits each. Then there are users “AHC300,” “Hourick,” “Chris Light,” and “207.232.97.13” with a lower number of edits, more than one hundred each. Why do these users make the most edits? Firstly, it is to do with the topics they edit. “Rjensen,” “Settler,” and “AHC300” are involved with the creation and editing of the pages “History of the Democratic Party” and “History of the Republican Party”. “Richard Myers” contributes to the “History of the Industrial Workers of the World,” “Hourick” to the “History of the Houston Police Department,” “Chris Light” to the “History of the National Park Service,” and “207.232.97.13” to the “History of Alcoholics Anonymous”. All those pages represent very popular topics,

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<sup>21</sup> On how identities work in online communities, see Bruckman, *Should You Believe Wikipedia?*, 118–59.

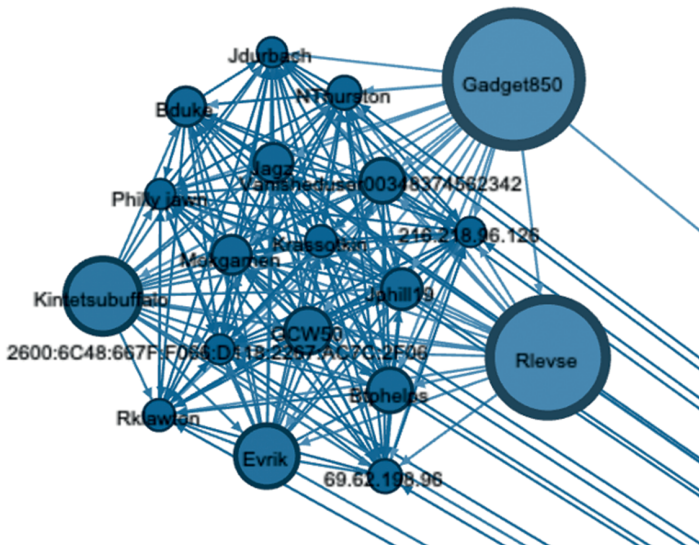
<sup>22</sup> The pages-networks are distinguishable because they have a high number of exclusive editors despite the smaller number of editors shared with other clusters.



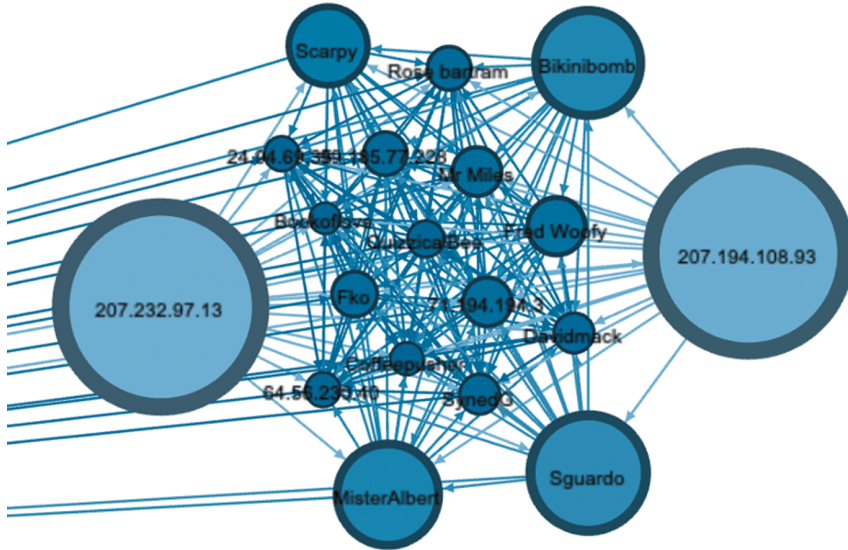
which are central to modern United States history, especially the “History of the Democratic Party” and the “History of the Republican Party”. Furthermore, those topics are broader than, for example, the “History of the National Register of Historic Places” or the “History of the Texas Ranger Division”. The more popular and broader the topics, the more edits they attract. This also relates to the process of consensus-making. The most popular and central topics within a category tend to attract more



**Figure 27:** History of organizations based in the United States; in this and the following figures: color – lighter color means more edits and darker color means fewer edits; node size – number of edits.



**Figure 28:** History of the Boy Scouts of America/History of organizations based in the United States.



**Figure 29:** History of Alcoholics Anonymous/History of organizations based in the United States.

editors, who also present different perspectives and points of view. Therefore, other editors need to constantly intervene in order to ensure appropriate edits are made on a given page. However, this cannot be detected and visualized in a network.

Another key consideration has to do with the individual characteristics of Wikipedia editors. In Figure 30, we see how many editors are interested in the topic they edit. Those displayed in a light blue color are interested in the topic that they edit, those in orange do not include any information about their interests, and those displayed in pink are not interested in the topic. Almost sixty-five percent of editors do not include any information about their interests; thirty-three percent are interested, and two percent are not. Even though most users do not clarify their interests within the Wikipedia community, it is evident that those editors responsible for high numbers of edits demonstrate a clear interest in the topic to which they have chosen to contribute. As shown in Figure 30, “Rjensen,” “Settler,” “Hourick,” “Richard Myers,” “Chris Light,” and “207.232.97.13” are all interested in the relevant topic. Only “AHC300” is displayed in orange, as this user does not disclose any information about their interests.

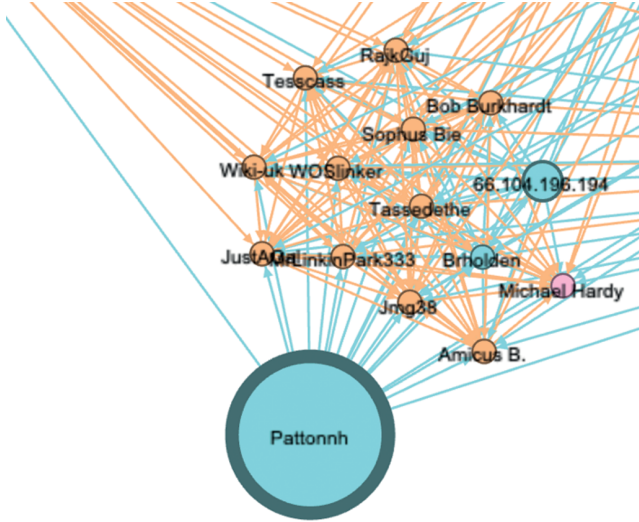
This pattern that the editors with the highest number of edits are also interested in the topic they choose to edit, however, does not only characterize the editors with the most contributions. If we zoom in on a smaller page-network of the category, we can detect the same pattern. For example, in Figure 31, we see the page “History of the New York City Bar Association”. The editors with the most



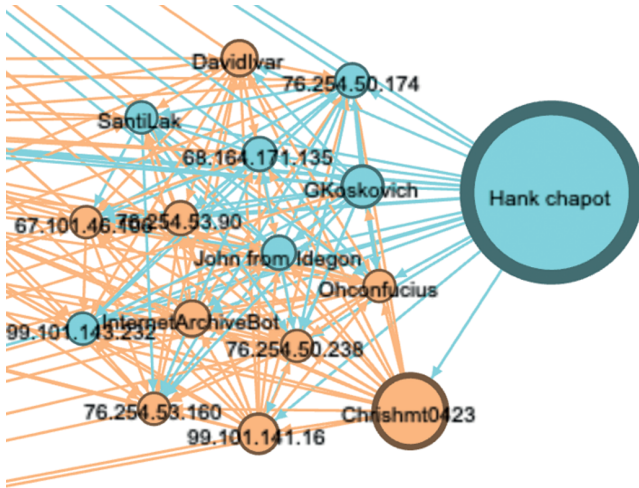
**Figure 30:** History of organizations based in the United States.

edits, “Pattonnh” and “66.104.196.194,” have an interest in this topic. The other editors in the network do not include information in their profiles, and one user is not interested at all. The same happens in the page “History of the San Francisco Police Department,” in Figure 32. “Hank Chapot,” the top editor of the page, is interested in the topic, the rest of the editors are either interested in the topic or they do not disclose any information about their interests. The same pattern characterizes even smaller networks, in which the difference between the top editor and the rest of the editors is not that high, as in Figures 33 and 34. Therefore, the interest in the topic determines the number of edits that editors make. Of course, the more popular the theme of a page, the higher the number of edits the page attracts. But even on pages that relate to more specialized thematic areas, the editors with the most edits appear to be interested in that specific topic. The top editors are not only interested in what they edit but they also keep an active profile page, in which they refer to their research interests within the Wikipedia community.

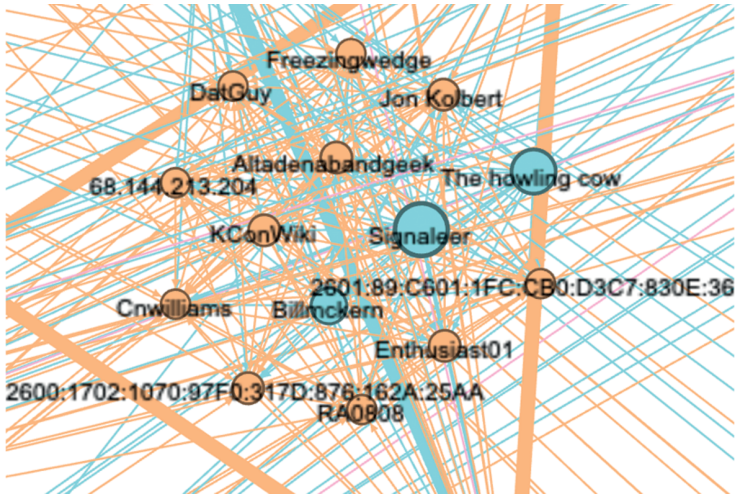
Even if we look at the category of “History of Science and Technology in the United States,” which has a completely different thematic area to the previous examples, the same results appear. Five editors are the top editors of the category, and four out of the five disclose their interest in the topic (Figures 35 and 36). When we zoom in on smaller pages-networks (Figures 37 and 38), we can again see the same pattern. On most pages, the editor with the highest number of contributions is interested in the topic they edit. The same results appear when we look at the category “LGBT history in the United States” (Figure 39). In this network, eight editors have more than one hundred edits, as the category of LGBT history has more pages than the other two categories. Also, this category includes topics that can be regarded as more controversial than the articles in the



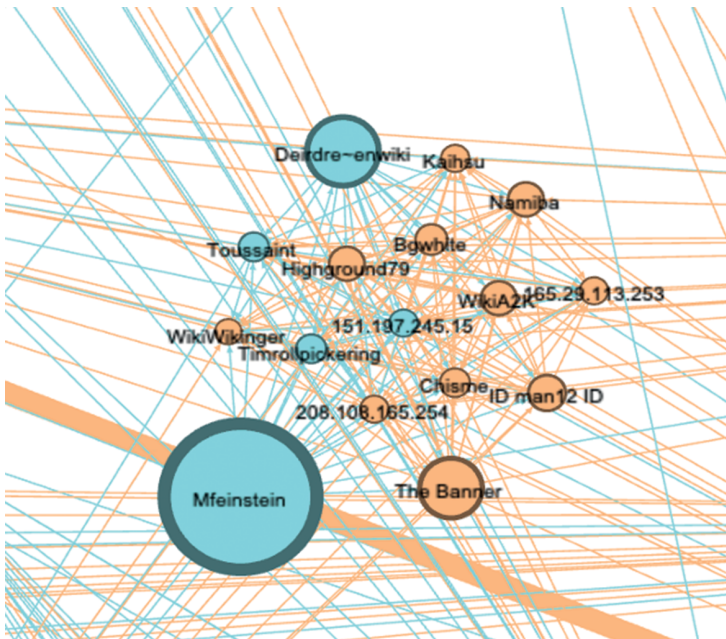
**Figure 31:** History of the New York City Bar Association/History of organizations based in the United States; in this and the following figures: color – light blue means interested in the topic they edit, orange color means no available information, and pink means not interested in the topic; node size – number of edits.



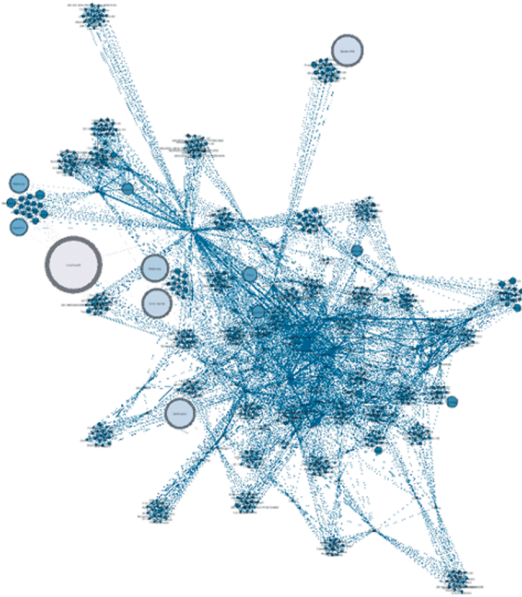
**Figure 32:** History of the San Francisco Police Department/History of organizations based in the United States.



**Figure 33:** History of the United States Army National Guard/History of organizations based in the United States.



**Figure 34:** History of the Green Party of the United States/History of organizations based in the United States.

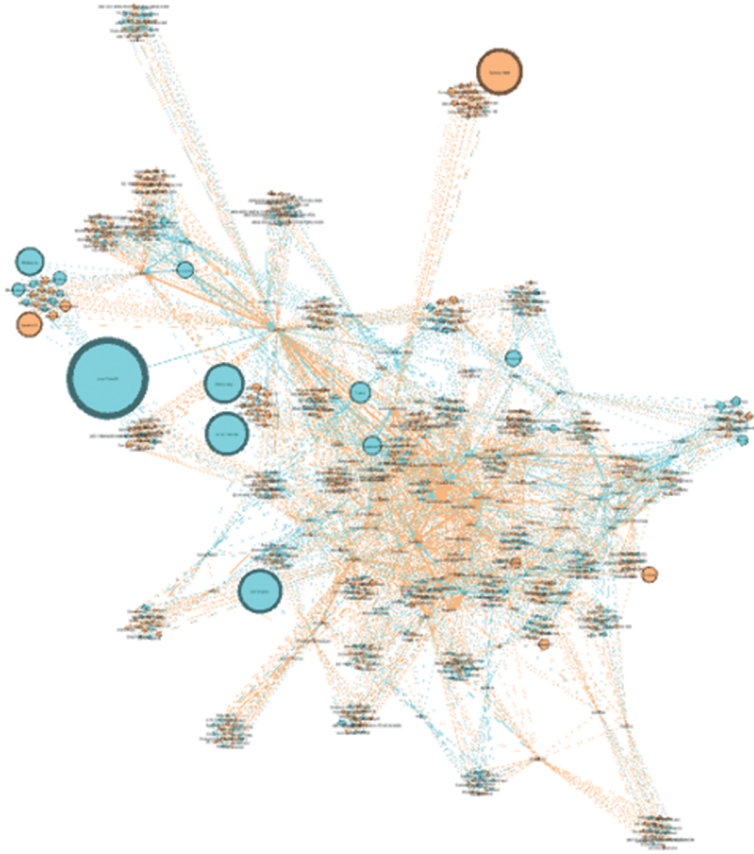


**Figure 35:** History of Science and Technology in the United States; color – lighter color means more edits and darker color means fewer edits; node size – number of edits.

other two categories. The more controversial the pages, the higher the editors' level of engagement, as they try to reach a consensus. In Figure 40, we detect the same pattern regarding the interest of editors in the topic they edit. All the top editors of the category-network are interested in the relevant topic. If we zoom in and examine the pages-networks more closely, we can see the same results in most cases (Figures 41–43).

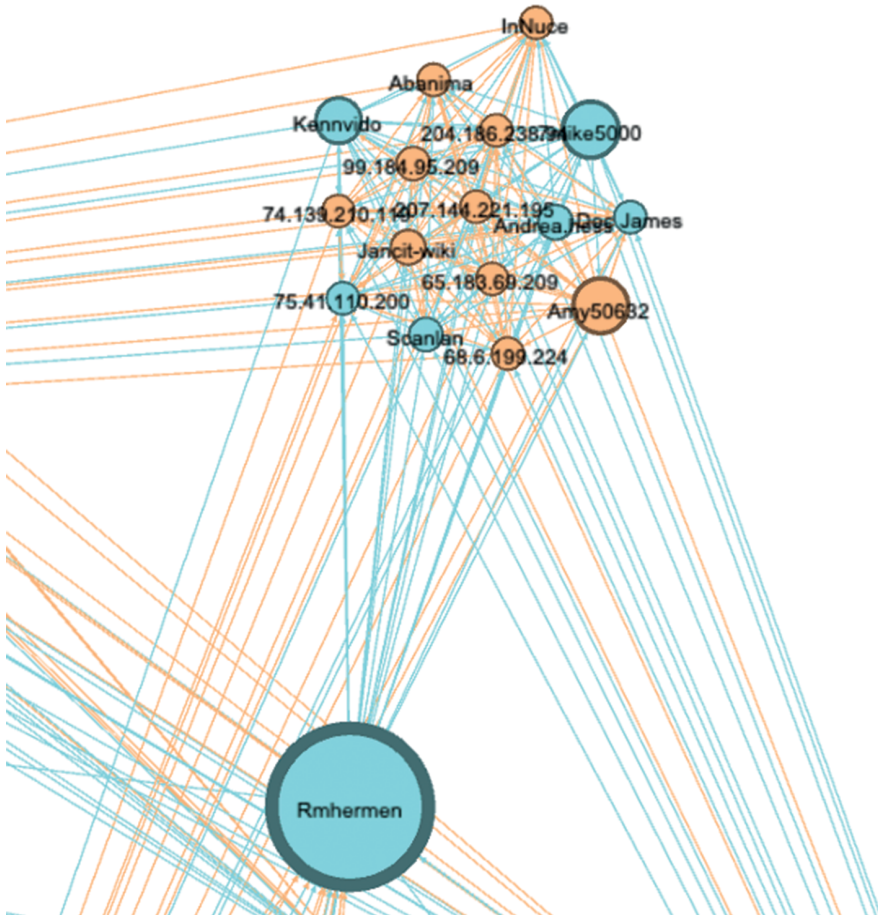
It is evident that most top editors in each category are highly interested in the topic to which they contribute. Overall, in all three examined categories-networks, thirty-five percent of editors are interested in the topic they edit, and almost all the editors with the highest number of contributions are interested in the topic. It is the topic itself which drives and mobilizes Wikipedia editors to engage with the creation and editing of Wikipedia pages related to history. What about other factors, though, such as having an interest in history or an educational background related to history? Do those factors encourage Wikipedia users to contribute to Wikipedia?

Figure 44 displays users who are interested in history. The editors who are interested in history are displayed in light blue, those who are not interested are displayed in pink, and those who do not include any information about their interest in history are displayed in orange.



**Figure 36:** History of Science and Technology in the United States; in this and the following figures: color – light blue means interested in the topic they edit, orange color means no available information, and pink means not interested in the topic; node size – number of edits.

Less than half of the editors, who are interested in this topic, are interested in history. Specifically, in the category “History of organizations based in the United States,” thirteen percent of the editors are interested in history, while thirty-three percent are interested in the topic (Figure 44). Of the seven top editors in this category, three are interested in history. The rest just mention that they are interested in the topic itself. Similar results appear in the other two categories. In the category “History of science and technology,” eighteen percent of editors are interested in history, while thirty-five percent are interested in the topic (Figure 45). Of the five top editors, three are interested in history. In the category “LGBT history in the United States,” eighteen percent of editors are interested in history and thirty-eight

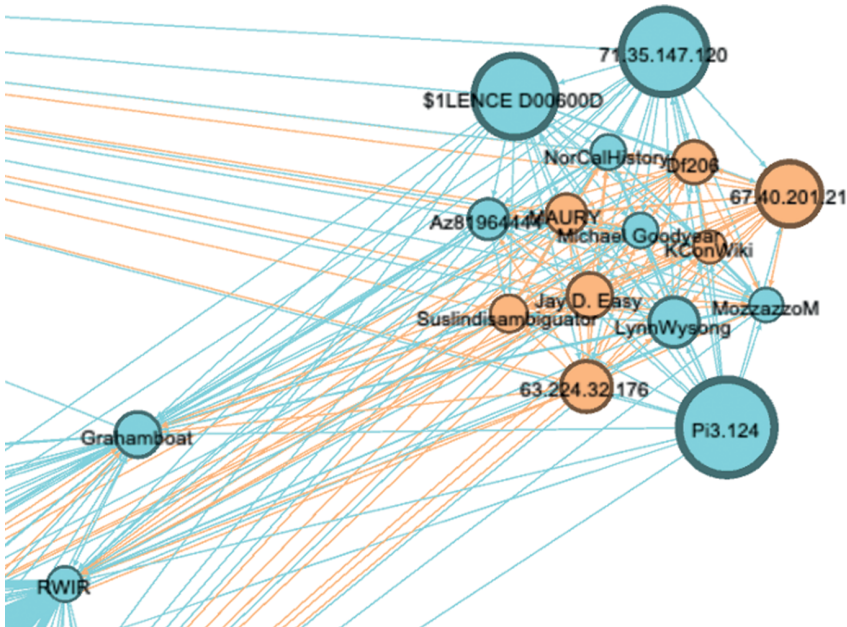


**Figure 37:** West Nile virus in the United States/History of Science and Technology in the United States.

percent are interested in the topic (Figure 46). Of the eight top editors in this category, two are interested in history. The users identify themselves more with the topic itself rather than with history as a field or category of interest.

This point is interesting as it reveals how the concept of “history” is perceived within the Wikipedia community. The fact that many Wikipedia users create and edit historical pages, while they are interested only in the topic itself rather than history more generally, emphasizes the need for a retheorization of “history” within the context of Wikipedia as a digital and public space. Wikipedians’ identification with individual topics and history more broadly is reminiscent of Rose-





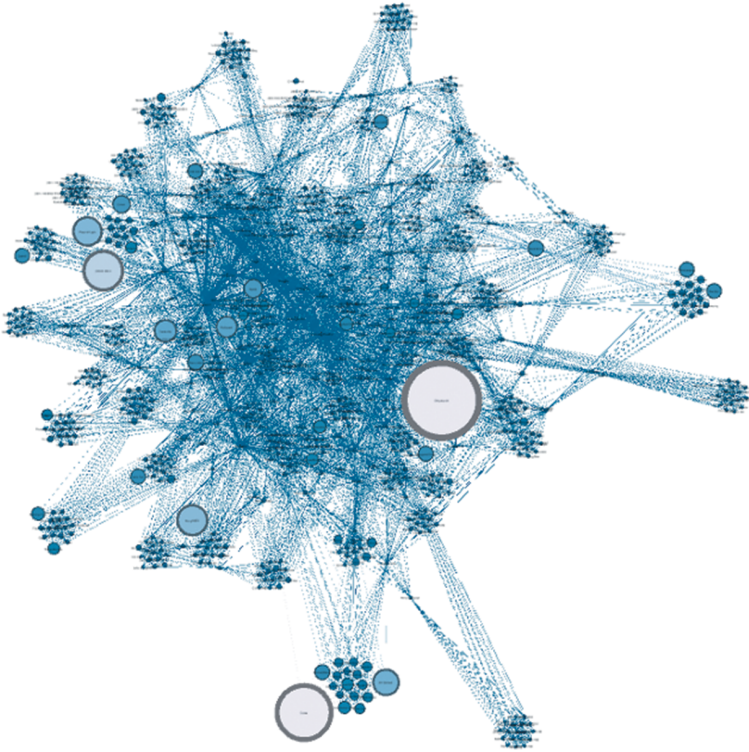
**Figure 38:** United States Exploring Expedition/History of Science and Technology in the United States.

nzweig and Thelen’s work, *The Presence of the Past*, in which “the past” was present in the interviews conducted, but “history” was not – or, at least, not how it has been defined in the academic textbooks.<sup>23</sup> Interviewees tended to associate “history” with a boring school class, whereas “the past” was seen to contain a volume of information that could help them with their lives. Wikipedia’s distinction between topic and history is similar to Hayden White’s distinction between the “historical past” and the “practical past.”<sup>24</sup> On Wikipedia, the topic serves as the “practical past,” which has a political and practical use in the present and encourages most Wikipedia editors to create and edit historical articles. History becomes the “historical past,” a more scientific and distant past, which appears to motivate fewer editors to engage with Wikipedia’s historical contents.

However, as we have seen in the previous chapters both of these pasts coexist within the Wikipedia community and define users’ engagement and the production of historical knowledge. Even if history is not the most significant factor that

<sup>23</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 9.

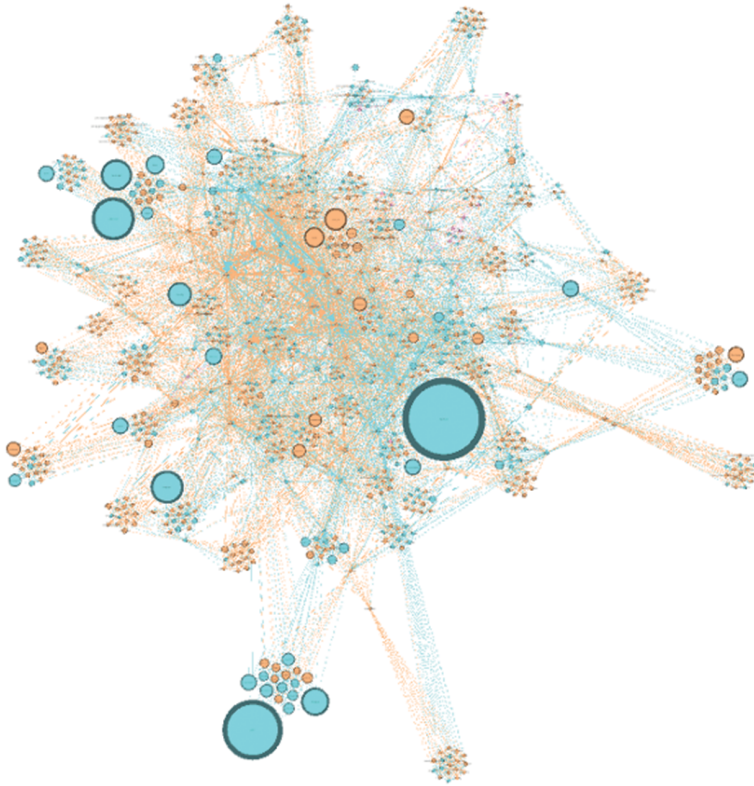
<sup>24</sup> White, “The Practical Past,” 10–19; White, “Politics, History and the Practical Past,” 127–34.



**Figure 39:** LGBT history in the United States; color – lighter color means more edits and darker color means fewer edits; node size – number of edits.

encourages Wikipedians to create and edit articles, it mobilizes a great number of editors to an important extent. By looking closer at the pages-networks, we notice that in most cases there are few editors who are interested in history, but most of them have a significant number of contributions. Of course, there are pages-networks in which no one is interested in history; however, in most cases, there will be at least one editor interested in history. These patterns appear in all three categories (Figures 47–56).

On their profile pages, some editors include information about their educational background. In each category studied here, only two percent of Wikipedia editors have references to their educational backgrounds. Specifically, in the category “History of organizations based in the United States,” two percent of editors claim that they have studied history either at undergraduate or graduate level (displayed in pink), seven percent have studied a subject or field other than his-



**Figure 40:** LGBT history in the United States; in this and the following figures: color – light blue means interested in the topic they edit, orange color means no available information, and pink means not interested in the topic; node size – number of edits.

tory (light blue), and ninety percent do not include any information about their education (orange) (Figure 57). In the category “History of Science and Technology in the United States,” less than one percent of editors have any education in history, six percent have an education in a different field, and ninety-three percent do not include information about their educational background (Figure 58). In “LGBT history in the United States,” one percent of users have studied history, three percent has studied any other field, and ninety-six percent have not disclosed any information about their studies (Figure 59).

Most Wikipedians do not include any information about their degrees or the studies they may have completed. Education does not play any role in users’ engagement with history, and even more significantly, education does not define the identity of most Wikipedians. Even the editors who have studied in a different

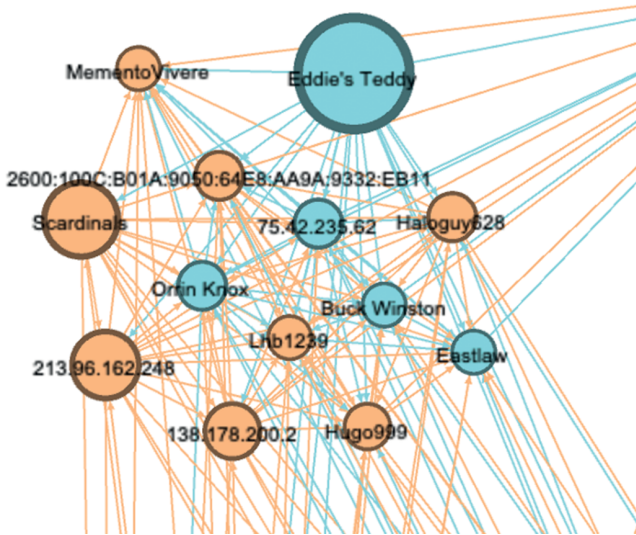


Figure 41: United States Navy dog handler hazing scandal/LGBT history in the United States.

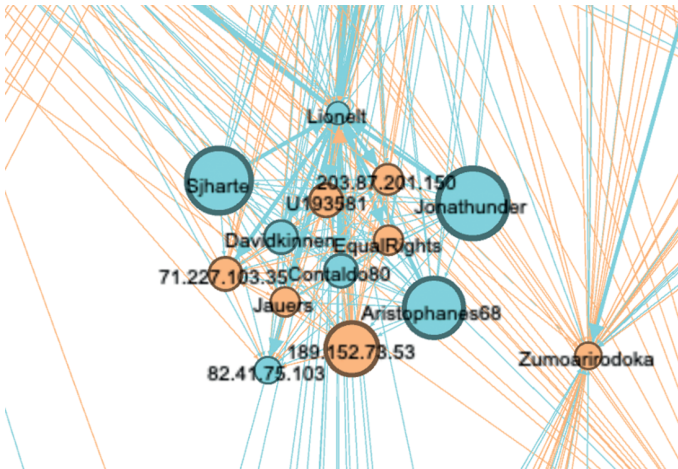
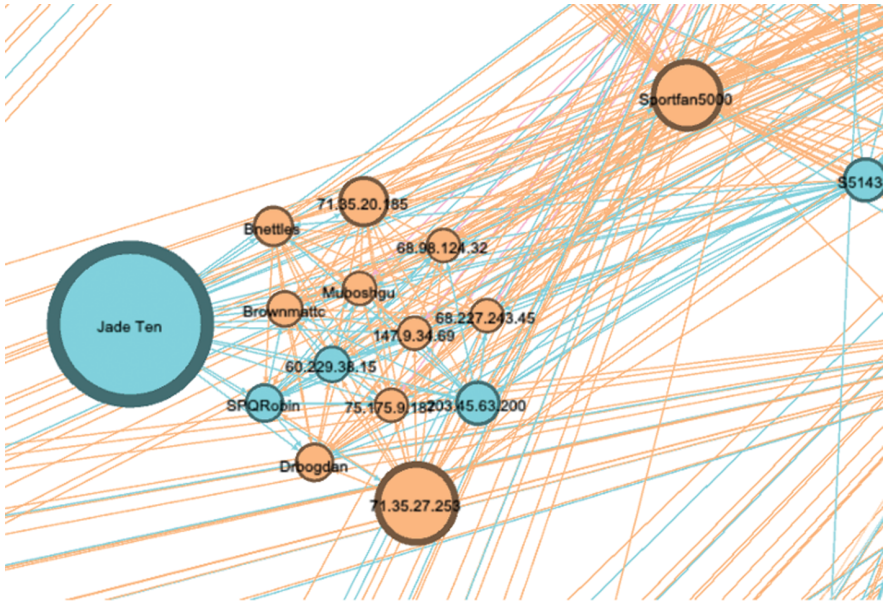
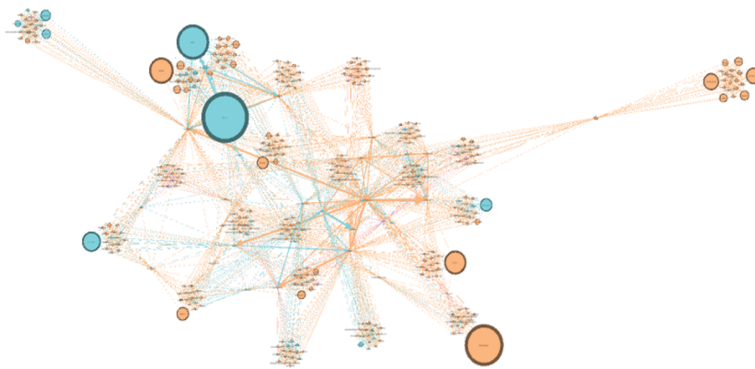


Figure 42: Metropolitan Community Church/LGBT history in the United States.

field number more than those who have studied history. This is the case in all three categories. These fields might be close to history, such as literature, political science, sociology, anthropology, but still, even in those cases, studies in history do not appear to shape users' participation on Wikipedia. It is the interest Wikiped-

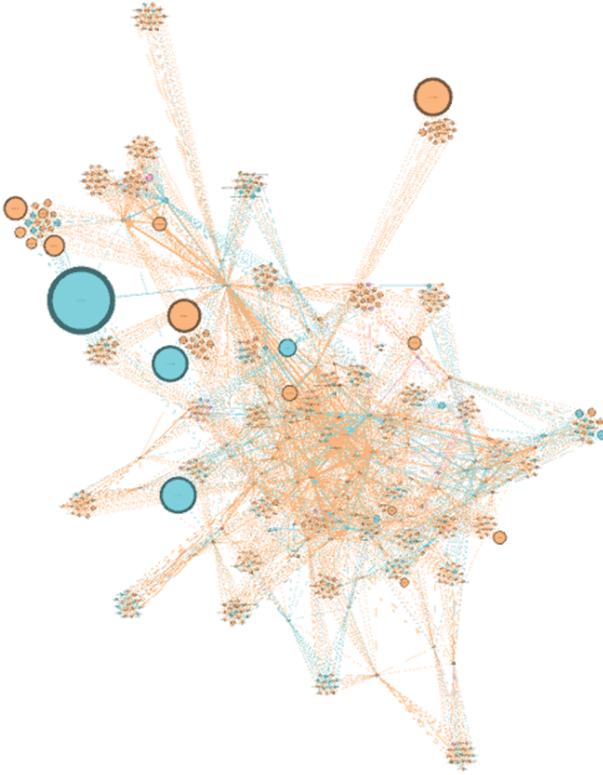


**Figure 43:** Arizona SB 1062/LGBT history in the United States.



**Figure 44:** History of organizations based in the United States.

dians have in the topic they edit that defines users' engagement with history and shapes their virtual identities on Wikipedia. The interest in history is also significant, as it determines users' participation within the Wikipedia community to a large extent. Education appears to be the least relevant factor when it comes to encouraging Wikipedians to write about history. While their educational background may be fixed, the identities of Wikipedia users are fluid; they are deter-

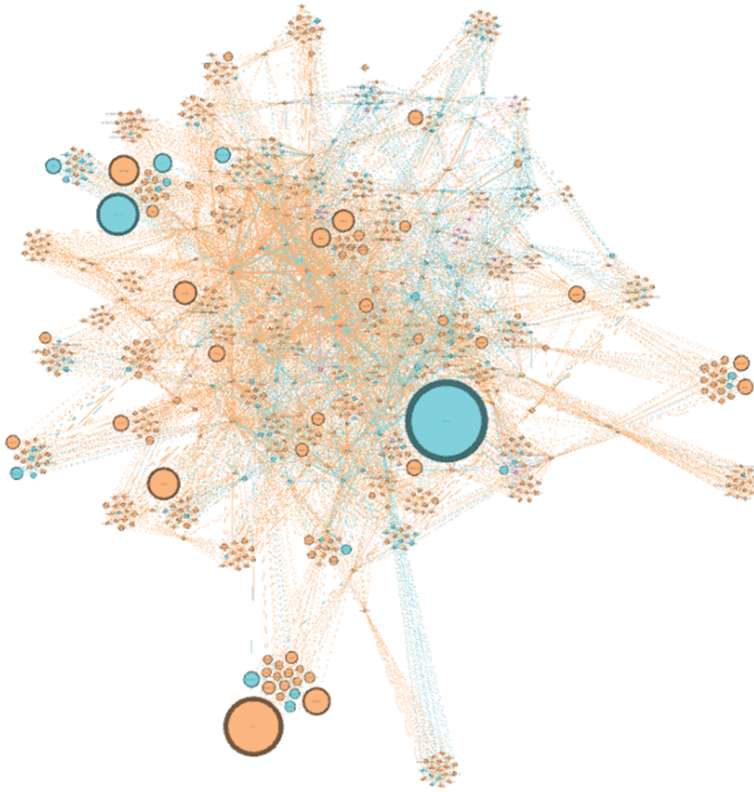


**Figure 45:** History of science and technology in the United States.

mined by the users themselves and not by the studies they have previously completed or the degrees they have earned. Wikipedia constitutes a digital and public space in which editors can display and demonstrate their interests and not just the skills or knowledge they have obtained from their educational training. The interests of Wikipedians can constantly change and, therefore, this allows users to present themselves as they wish within the Wikipedia community, and, even more importantly, to become experts in the areas they are passionate about.

### **Bots, veterans, and newbies**

Interest in a given topic, and to a lesser extent in history more generally, encourages most Wikipedia users to create and edit Wikipedia articles. However, the actions of some agents within a category-network remain unknown. What happens to the users who are neither interested in the topic they edit nor in history? Why



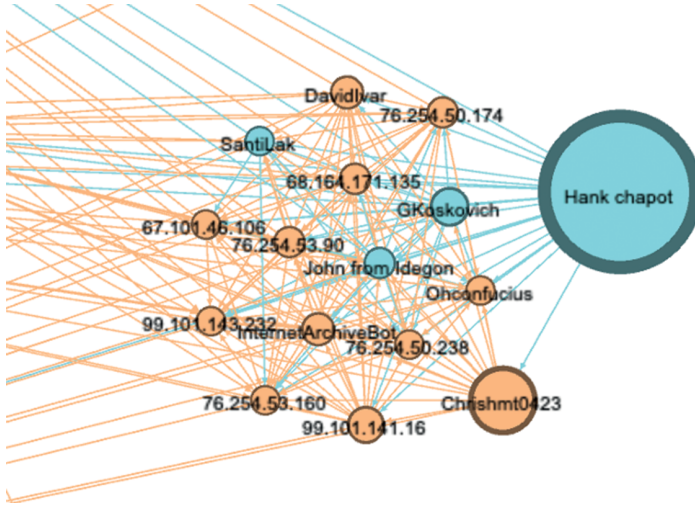
**Figure 46:** LGBT history in the United States.

do they edit Wikipedia articles about history? How do they get engaged with the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia? To answer these questions, we need to think about the digital setup of Wikipedia and the existence of non-human agents within the wider networks of engagement and interactions. In this section, by looking at the centrality of Wikipedia editors within a category-network, I reveal the structures of power that determine the different roles of Wikipedia editors and define the production of historical knowledge on the site.<sup>25</sup>

In the previous section, the size of each node was based on the number of their contributions in the three categories-networks. Most of these nodes (the relevant editors) are interested either in the topic itself or in history more generally. But what about the rest? Let us look at the networks again but this time visualize

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<sup>25</sup> For a broader analysis of the social roles of people in online communities, see Bruckman, *Should you Believe Wikipedia?*, 24–7.



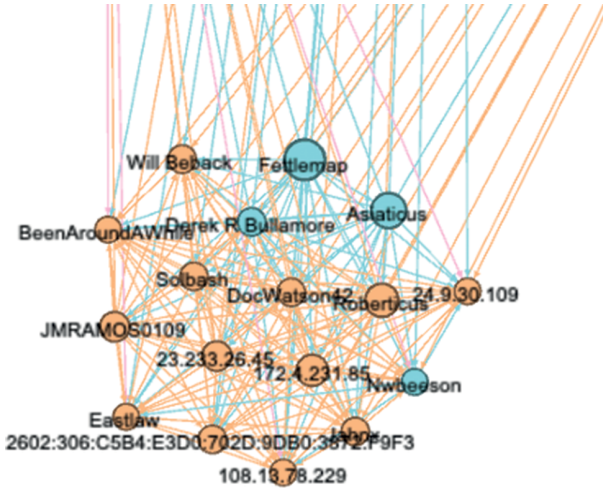
**Figure 47:** History of the San Francisco Police Department/History of organizations based in the United States.



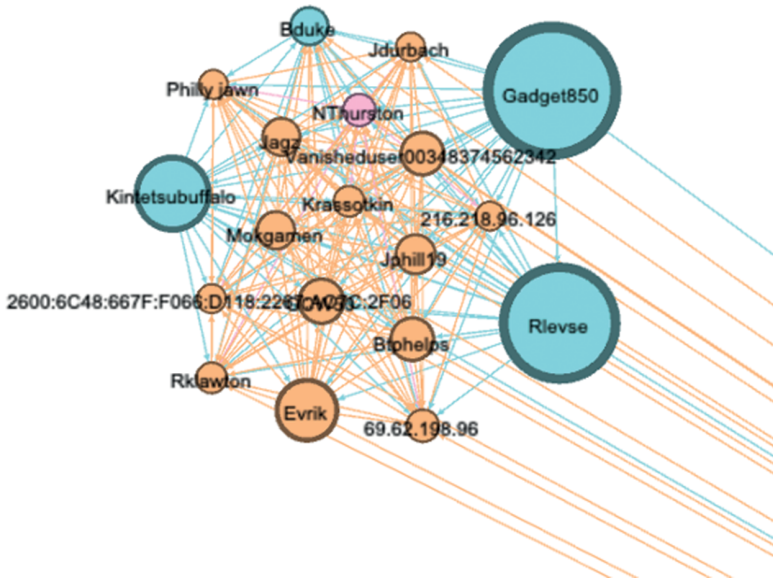
**Figure 48:** History of the National Register of Historic Places/History of organizations based in the United States.

the nodes according to their centrality within each category-network, namely, according to the number of editors' connections (edges). Different results appear. In the category-network "History of organizations based in the United States," the most central editors are different from those with a high number of contribu-

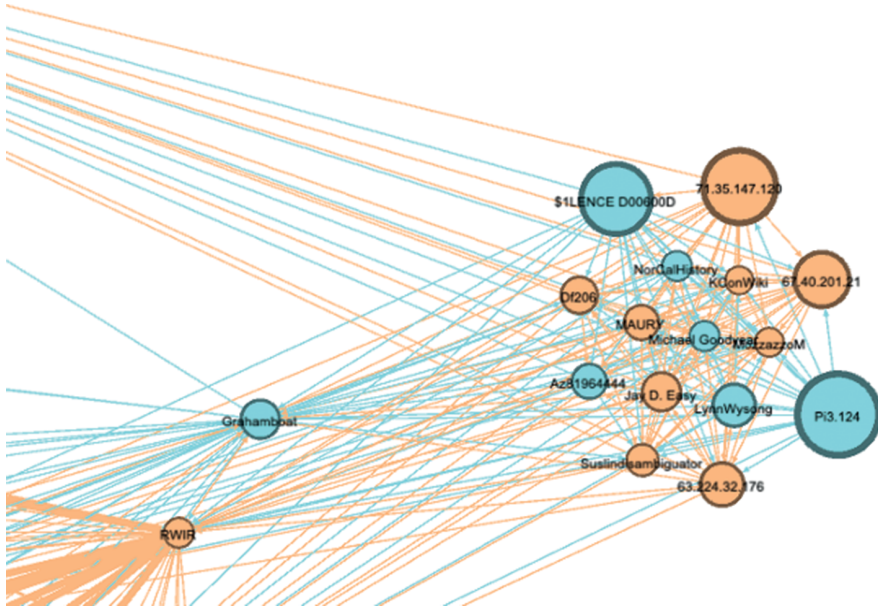




**Figure 49:** History of the Los Angeles Police Department/History of organizations based in the United States.



**Figure 50:** History of the Boy Scouts of America/History of organizations based in the United States.



**Figure 51:** United States Exploring Expedition/History of Science and Technology in the United States.

tions. In Figure 60, the editors with the highest number of connections (edges) are displayed with a larger node and in a light pink color. The editors with more connections are the editors who appear on more pages. In other words, the editors with more connections are those who have edited more pages. Those editors should not be confused with the editors with higher numbers of edits.

By looking at Figure 59 more closely, we notice that the editors with the most connections are: the “InternetArchiveBot,” the “ClueBot NG,” the “Cydebot,” “Tim!,” “Monkbot,” and “Srich32977”. Then we have “Illegitimate Barrister,” “AnomieBOT,” “KolbertBot,” “GreenC bot,” and “Hmains”. It is more than obvious that most of those editors have a common characteristic. They are bots. According to Wikipedia, a bot “is an automated tool that carries out repetitive and mundane tasks to maintain the 54,264,985 pages of the English Wikipedia”.<sup>26</sup> The communication scholar Randall Livingstone has defined Wikipedia bots as “a program or script that carries

<sup>26</sup> “Wikipedia:Bots,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Bots> On the history of Wikipedia bots, see “Wikipedia:History of Wikipedia bots,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:History\\_of\\_Wikipedia\\_bots](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:History_of_Wikipedia_bots)



**Figure 52:** Science and technology in the United States/History of Science and Technology in the United States.

out an often tedious or repetitive tasks for its creator”.<sup>27</sup> They are created in the python programming language by Wikipedia users and some of the bots have the same user namespace and talk pages on Wikipedia.<sup>28</sup> Some bot operators use photographs and descriptions to anthropomorphize their bots.<sup>29</sup> The first bots appeared on Wikipedia in late 2001, but in 2002 bots started to have an active role on Wikipedia.<sup>30</sup> Wikipedia has established bot policies to control its bots.<sup>31</sup> As José van Dijck has explained, there are two types of bots, the editing or coauthoring bots and non-

<sup>27</sup> Randall Livingstone, “Immaterial Editors: Bots and Bot Policies Across Global Wikipedia,” in *Global Wikipedia: International and Cross-Cultural Issues in Online Collaboration*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 137.

<sup>31</sup> Livingstone, “Immaterial Editors,” 12 and 17. On the bot policy of the English Wikipedia, see “Wikipedia:Bot policy,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Bot\\_policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Bot_policy)



Figure 53: The Machine in the Garden/History of Science and Technology in the United States.

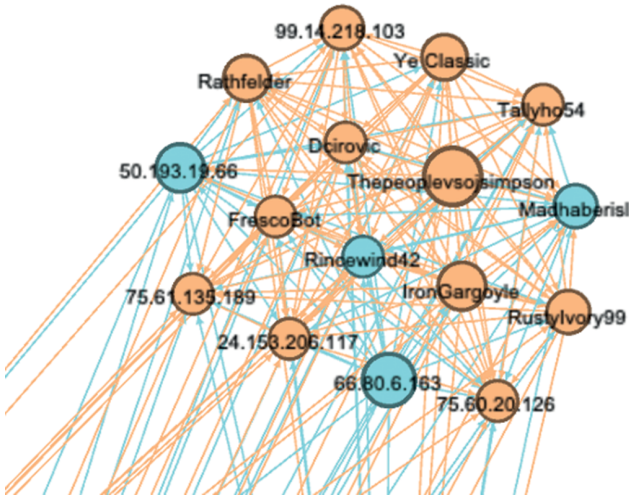
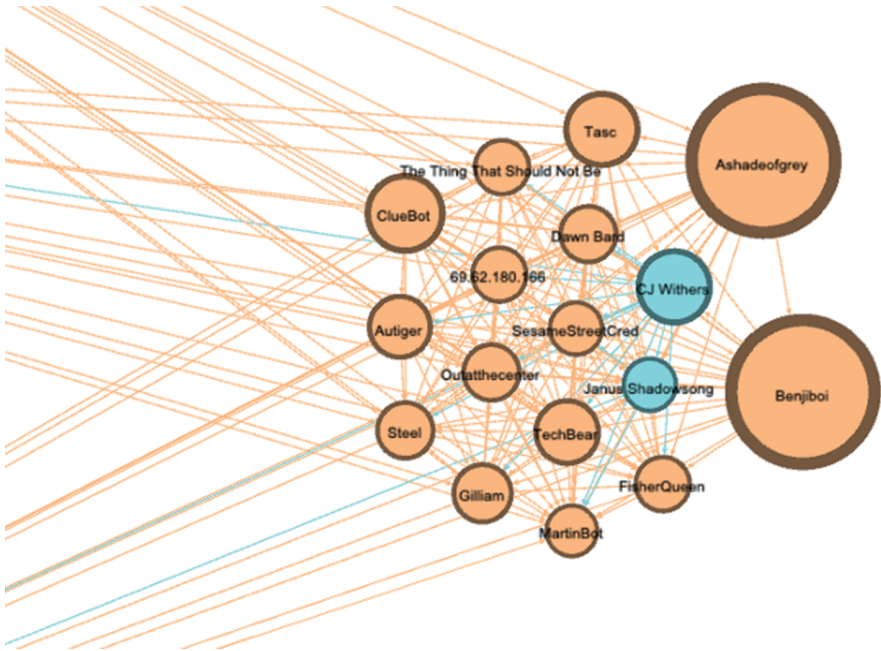


Figure 54: Horizon Services/LGBT history in the United States.



**Figure 55:** Gay pride/LGBT history in the United State.

editing or administrative bots.<sup>32</sup> The administrative bots are very common on Wikipedia. They are responsible for performing policing tasks, such as blocking spam and detecting vandalism, etc. The coauthoring bots are tasked with creating and writing articles about specific topics, but they are not very common on Wikipedia.<sup>33</sup>

Even though bots have their own user pages, they do not include information about their interests in particular topics, or in history, or their education.<sup>34</sup> Thus, they have been depicted as unknown actors in the networks above. They do not make many edits, only a few to each page, but they are the most central actors within a category-network. They appear on most pages. In Figures 61 and 62, we can see that the more central editors are bots and, therefore, they are displayed as unknown actors (orange) and not as interested in the topic or in history (light blue). Only “Tim!,” “Illegitimate Barrister,” and “Hmains,” who are human actors, are displayed as interested in history and/or the topic.

<sup>32</sup> van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 138.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 138–9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

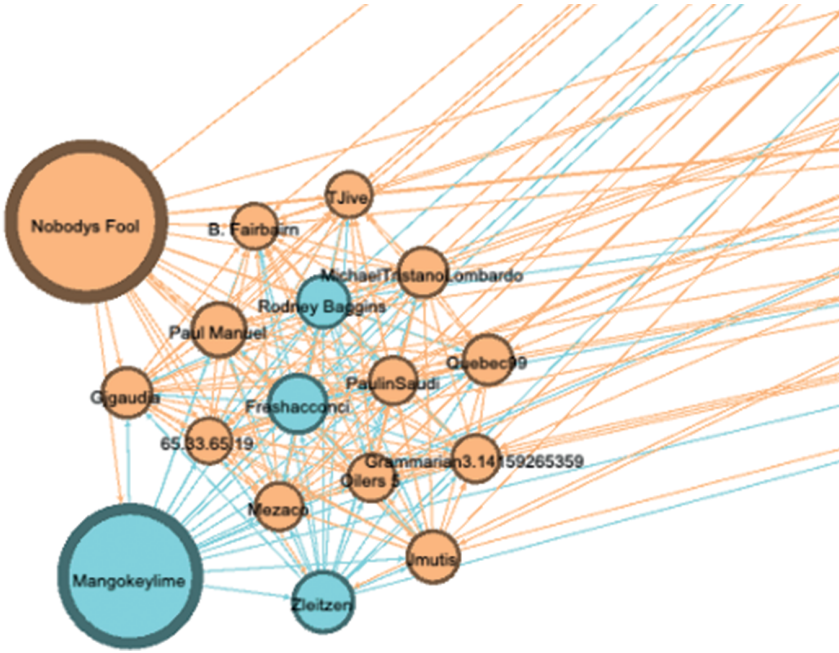


Figure 56: Mariel boatlift/LGBT history in the United States.

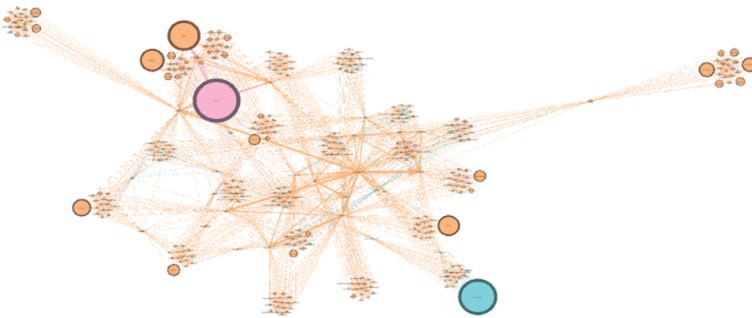
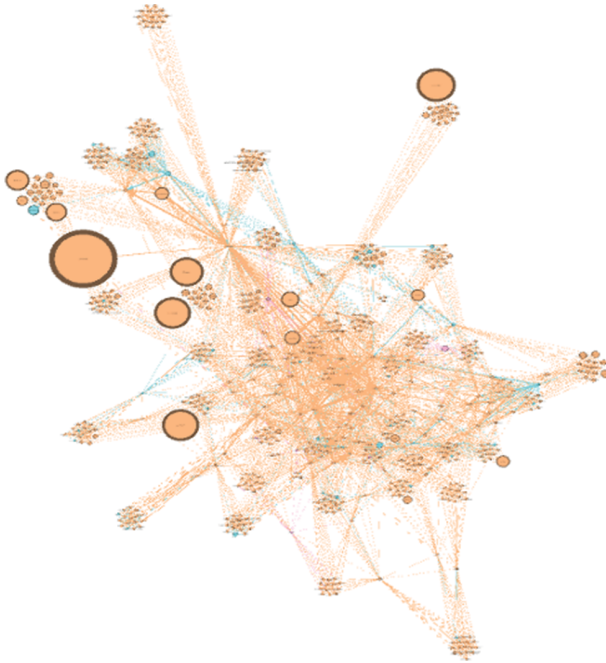


Figure 57: History of organizations based in the United States.

In the category “History of Science and Technology in the United States,” the most central editors are “Monkbot,” “Citation bot,” “ClueBot NG,” “InternetArchiveBot,” “Rjwilmsi,” and “RjwilmsiBot”. Then there is “SmackBot,” “Cydebot,” “Bender the Bot,” “Yobot,” and “Hmains” (Figure 63). Again, the most central editors are bots, and these are effectively the same bots that appear in the previous category, “History of organizations based in the United States”. Only two actors are human, “Rjwilmsi”

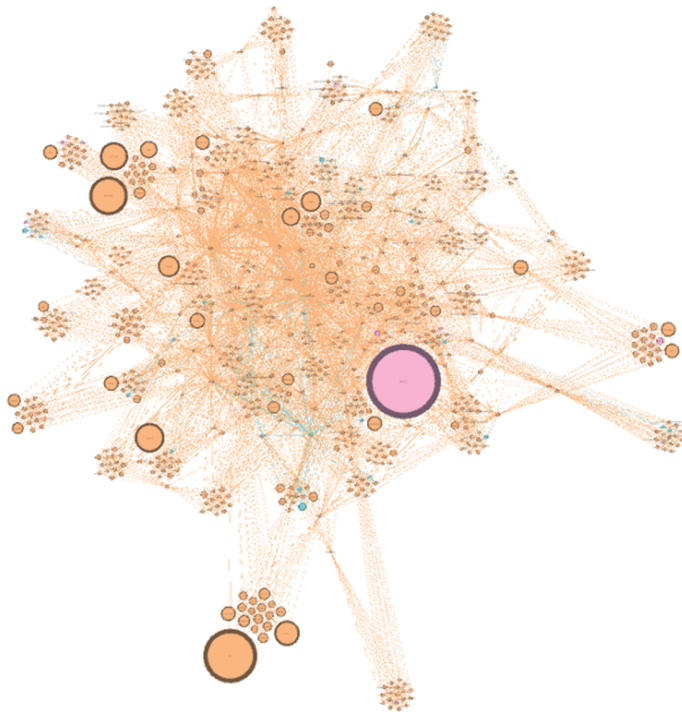


**Figure 58:** History of Science and Technology in the United States.

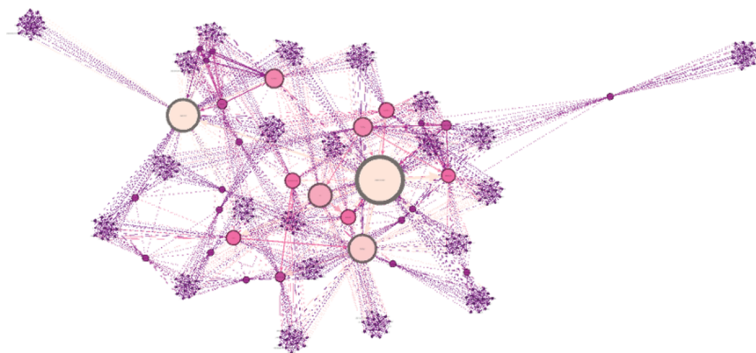
and “Hmains”. The latter also appear in the previous category. In Figures 64 and 65, we can see that the bots are marked as unknowns in terms of their interest in either the topic or in history, and that “Rjwilmsi” and “Hmains” are interested in both history and technology.

The same results appear in the category “LGBT history in the United States” (Figure 66). The more central actors of the network are “InternetArchiveBot,” “Monkbot,” “Bender the bot,” “AnomieBOT,” “SmackBot,” and “Citation bot.” “Treker,” “GreenC bot,” “Varnent,” “Wikignome0529,” “Bmclaughlin9,” and “Bearcat” have slightly fewer connections. Again, most of these are bots. In Figures 67 and 68, these bots are displayed as unknowns and colored orange. The central human-actors of the network are interested either in the topic or in history. Specifically, “Treker” and “Varnent” are interested both in the topic and history, “Bearcat” and “Wikignome0529” are interested only in the topic, while “Bmclaughlin9” does not include adequate information on their profile page. It is interesting that the user “Hmains,” who appears in the other two categories-networks, is also a central editor in this category-network.

By looking at the centrality of the editors within a category, we can detect two main points. First, it is impossible to truly understand how Wikipedians pro-

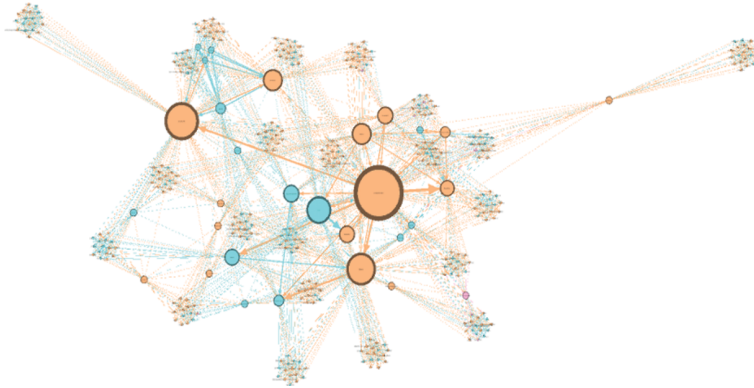


**Figure 59:** LGBT history in the United States.

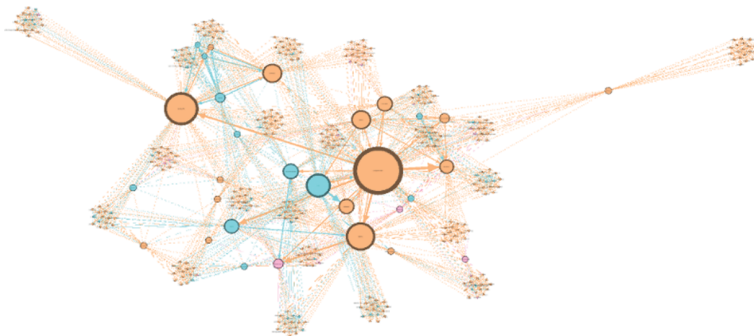


**Figure 60:** History of organizations based in the United States; color – lighter color means higher number of connections (edges) and darker color means less connections; node size – network centrality.





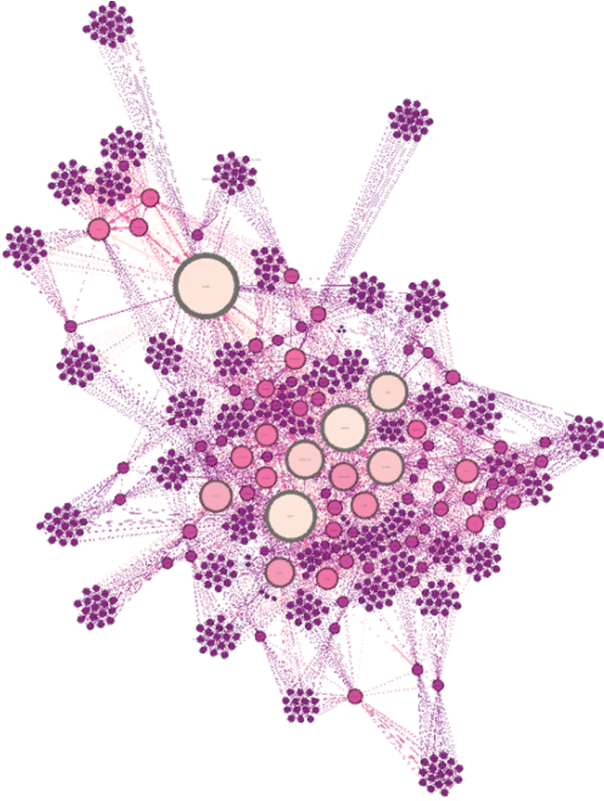
**Figure 61:** History of organizations based in the United States; color – light blue means interested in the topic they edit, orange color means no available information, and pink means not interested in the topic; node size – network centrality.



**Figure 62:** History of organizations based in the United States; color – light blue means interested in history, orange color means no available information, and pink means not interested in history; node size – network centrality.

duce historical knowledge without a consideration of the role played by bots.<sup>35</sup> The networks shown above make it clear that bots are the most central actors in a network, as they have the highest number of connections. As Nathaniel Tkacz has pointed out, Wikipedia cannot be understood without its materiality, which is important in terms of any organizational apparatus and includes its servers, software and code, operating systems, web browsers, computers, devices, screens,

<sup>35</sup> On the role of bots in the social media universe, see Tony Veale and Mike Cook, *Twitterbots. Making Machines that Make Meaning* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press, 2018).

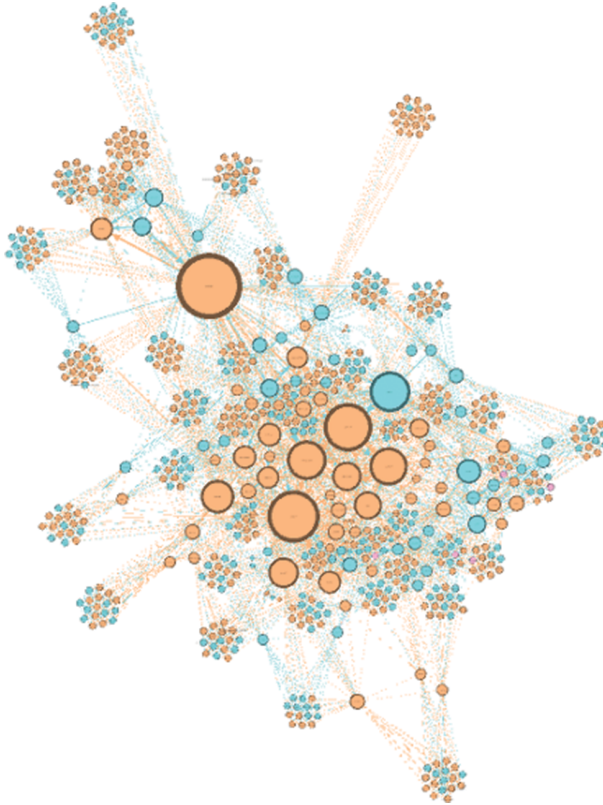


**Figure 63:** History of Science and Technology in the United States; color – lighter color means higher number of connections (edges) and darker color means less connections; node size – network centrality.

keyboards, etc.<sup>36</sup> Bots are one of the most important functional aspects of Wikipedia.<sup>37</sup> As shown in the networks above, they constitute the most central agents within a category-network and have connections to multiple pages. Their profiles do not include any information about their interests or education, so they cannot be easily classified, but without them the examined categories-networks would not even exist. They are not only central within one category-network but appear in all three categories, which are completely different thematically and randomly

<sup>36</sup> Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*, 111.

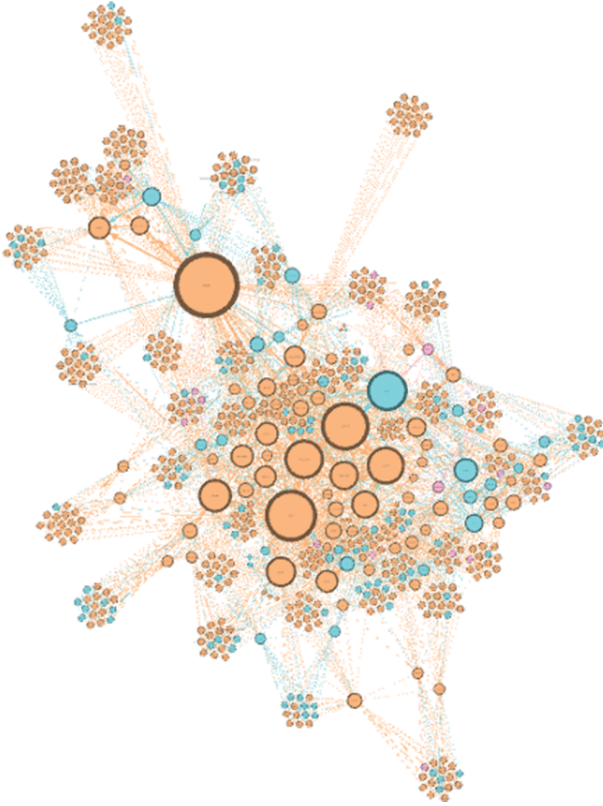
<sup>37</sup> Ibid. For bots on Wikipedia, also see Randall M. Livingstone, “Population automation: An interview with Wikipedia bot pioneer Ram-Man,” *First Monday* 21, no. 1 (2016), accessed July 20, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i1.6027>



**Figure 64:** History of Science and Technology in the United States; in this and the following figure: color – light blue means interested in the topic they edit, orange color means no available information, and pink means not interested in the topic; node size – network centrality.

chosen. This means that these non-human actors not only have the most connections in a network, but they also determine the production of historical knowledge to a large extent. Even though they are not the editors with the highest numbers of contributions, these bots appear in all three categories. They make few edits, but these are on almost every page. While editors interested in a topic or in history make far more edits, but on fewer pages. Randall Livingstone’s argument that bots are not just programs and lines of code but represent a significant and influential population within a “sociotechnical” network of actors, is more than evident in the networks above.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Livingstone, “Immaterial Editors,” 10.



**Figure 65:** History of Science and Technology in the United States.

Second, bots are assigned multiple editing and administrative tasks that are essential for the production of historical knowledge. Bruno Latour was one of the first scholars in the humanities who argued that in a network there are human and non-human subjects (machines).<sup>39</sup> For him, the challenge is to investigate how these agents relate to each other and what their role is within a network. In 2008, when Wikipedia was becoming bigger, it also aimed to be more consistent in terms of checking spelling, grammar, and punctuation across all its articles. This was the major reason why Wikipedia started to introduce bots.<sup>40</sup> In all three categories, bots have significant administrative tasks. The “InternetArchiveBot” is one of the most central non-human agents within the three networks. Its role is to identify

<sup>39</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

<sup>40</sup> Lih, *The Wikipedia Revolution*, 99.



**Figure 66:** LGBT history in the United States; color – lighter color means higher number of connections (edges) and darker color means less connections; node size – network centrality.

and replace broken external links and make improvements to references on Wikipedia.<sup>41</sup> It was developed by the user “Cyberpower678” and is now funded by the Internet Archive.<sup>42</sup> The “ClueBot NG” is central in one of the three networks and is an anti-vandal bot, which detects and reverts vandalism quickly and automatically.<sup>43</sup> It was created and is maintained by a team of Wikipedia users.<sup>44</sup> “Cydebot,” also central in two of the three categories, is the “Cydebot” which is tasked with “moving and deleting categories and updating listed pages of categories”.<sup>45</sup> “Mon-

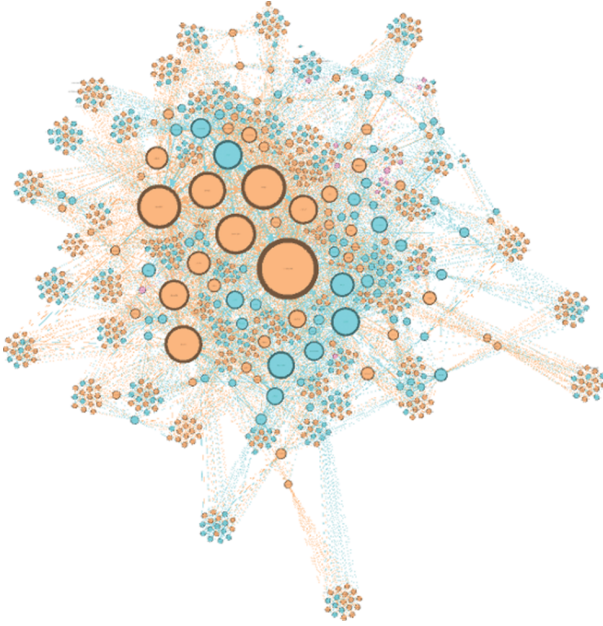
41 “User:InternetArchiveBot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:InternetArchiveBot>; “InternetArchiveBot,” *Wikimedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/InternetArchiveBot>

42 “User:InternetArchiveBot”.

43 “User:ClueBot NG,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:ClueBot\\_NG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:ClueBot_NG)

44 *Ibid.*

45 “User:Cydebot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Cydebot>



**Figure 67:** LGBT history in the United States; in this and the following figures: color – light blue means interested in the topic they edit, orange color means no available information, and pink means not interested in the topic; node size – network centrality.

kbot,” central in two of the three categories, makes coding edits that are tedious to do manually and is operated by the user “Trappist the monk”.<sup>46</sup>

Another significant bot is the “AnomieBOT,” which is devoted to various tasks such as “removing pages from categories where the pages do not meet the page inclusion criteria,” “removing flag icons from infoboxes and layout templates per community consensus,” updating crosslinks when content is archived, etc.<sup>47</sup> It uses multiple accounts, such as “AnomieBOTII,” “AnomieBOT III,” etc., and is operated by the user “Anomie”.<sup>48</sup> It is central in two of the three examined networks. “KolbertBot” is tasked with the conversion of HTTP external links to HTTPS for compatible websites.<sup>49</sup> This conversion helps protect data integrity and

<sup>46</sup> “User:Monkbot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Monkbot>

<sup>47</sup> “User:AnomieBOT,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:AnomieBOT>

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> “User:KolbertBot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:KolbertBot>



**Figure 68:** LGBT history in the United States.

user privacy.<sup>50</sup> “KolbertBot” is central in one of the three networks and is run by “Jon Kolbert”. “GreenC bot” is central in two of the three categories and is responsible for multiple technical tasks, such as fixing citations, creating reports, adding maintenance tags to pages on-demand, etc.<sup>51</sup> It is operated by the user “GreenC”.<sup>52</sup> Another important bot is the “Citation bot,” also central in two networks, which is tasked with checking Wikipedia’s articles’ references, adding digital object identifiers (DOIs) to references, adding other identifiers (PMIDs, ISBNs), linking to open access repositories, and fixing formatting errors.<sup>53</sup> It is operated by “Smith609”.<sup>54</sup> The “RjwilmsiBot,” central in one category, has various tasks, such as tagging redirects, completing fields of news citations, creating redirects, correcting parame-

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “User:GreenC bot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:GreenC\\_bot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:GreenC_bot)

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> “User:Citation bot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Citation\\_bot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Citation_bot)

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

ter names in citation templates, etc.<sup>55</sup> It is run by the user “Rjwilmsi”.<sup>56</sup> Another central bot in two categories is the “SmackBot,” which is operated by “Rich Farmbrough” and has various tasks, such as correcting grammar and spelling mistakes, replacing birth dates and death dates in infoboxes, replacing start dates and end dates, etc.<sup>57</sup> There are two more bots, “Bender the Bot” and “Yobot”. The former is responsible for the conversion of existing external links on Wikipedia, from an unencrypted to an encrypted transport protocol for reasons of privacy, integrity, and authentication.<sup>58</sup> It is operated by “bender235” and is central in two of the three case studies.<sup>59</sup> The latter is central in one network and is operated by the user “Magioladitis”.<sup>60</sup> It has multiple purposes but it is mainly focused on the categorization of individuals in categories regarding the year, date, and place of their birth/date, the time period in which they lived, their profession, etc.<sup>61</sup> Those are just the most central bots of the three categories-networks. There are also other bots that do not have as many connections in a network but are still important for the development of Wikipedia pages.

As the roles of these bots reveal, on Wikipedia there are users who are interested either in the specific topic they have decided to create/develop or in history as a broader field. Their interest in the topic or in history encourages them to participate in the Wikipedia community, spend time researching their topic, and contribute to the production of history. Those users are mainly the editors with the highest number of contributions. However, the production of historical knowledge does not take place in a vacuum. It is not only the result of interests and passions for specific topics and fields of knowledge but also the product of a “sociotechnical” and “technomanagerial” digital environment.<sup>62</sup> The major representatives of this environment are the bots of Wikipedia, along with the site’s many policies and guidelines. As José van Dijck argues, bots are “content agents” who actively engage

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55 “User:RjwilmsiBot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:RjwilmsiBot>

56 *Ibid.*

57 “User:Helpful Pixie Bot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Helpful\\_Pixie\\_Bot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Helpful_Pixie_Bot) This link is a redirection from the user page of “SmackBot”.

58 “User:Bender the Bot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Bender\\_the\\_Bot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Bender_the_Bot)

59 *Ibid.*

60 “User:Yobot,” *Wikipedia*, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Yobot>

61 *Ibid.*

62 For the term “sociotechnical,” see Livingstone, “Immaterial Editors,” 10. For the term “technomanagerial,” see Niederer and van Dijck, “Wisdom of the Crowd or technicity of the content?” 1369.



with Wikipedia's contents.<sup>63</sup> The networks examined above not only confirm van Dijck's point, but also underline how central these bots are to the existence of a Wikipedia category-network. The bots have administrative roles. They do not make the same high numbers of edits that editors interested in the topic/history do on each page; however, they do make quite a few administrative contributions, and these are on almost every page of a category. While the editors interested in a specific topic/history write and develop the article further by adding content to it, bots are tasked with more technical aspects: they check grammar and spelling mistakes, revert instances of vandalism, categorize articles, upload images, check references and citations, etc. As one Wikipedia user, "Ram-Man," who operates several bots, has put it: a bot is "like the miner who produces the raw materials while some other architect/artist/builder turns it into something beautiful".<sup>64</sup> The architect/artists/builders are the editors, who are interested in the topic or in history and make the highest number of edits in a category-network.

However, there is another important characteristic, one strongly connected to both power and hierarchy, which is easily detectable on Wikipedia: experience. To a certain extent, the category of editors who are interested in a specific topic or history more generally is a slightly vague one. An understanding of the role of bots is clear. Bots do not have personal information, as they are non-human agents. But what about all those editors who are interested in a topic/history or those who are not? What are the main characteristics of these users? Unfortunately, most Wikipedians do not disclose adequate information about their gender, ethnicity, working position, etc. They fill their profile pages with details that they want to present to the public community of Wikipedia. Nevertheless, there tends to be a common characteristic that most editors include within their profile pages – or, even if it is not included, is usually easily detectable. This is their editing experience within the Wikipedia community. Experience is also a vague term, as it is not defined by Wikipedia. For this reason, I have chosen to define experienced editors as those users with contributions to more than ten different Wikipedia pages, or having been awarded barnstars and other editing awards by Wikipedia. In Figures 69–80, we see how many editors can be classified as experienced or inexperienced in the three categories-networks.

In Figure 69, we see that almost sixty-two percent of the editors in the category "History of organization based in the United States" are experienced and displayed in orange. Twenty-three do not have any information about their experience and are displayed in light blue. Fifteen percent are not experienced editors; namely,

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<sup>63</sup> van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 139.

<sup>64</sup> Livingstone, "Population automation".



**Figure 69:** History of organizations based in the United States.

they have edited less than ten different Wikipedia pages and are displayed in pink within the network. As Figure 69 reveals, most users whose information about their experience is unknown tend to be bots, as they are the most central editors in the network. Some of them are also blocked, retired, or unregistered users, whose editing activities and history are not displayed on their profile pages. Regarding editors who are experienced, some of them are also central in the network, but mainly, as Figure 70 shows, the experienced editors are those with the higher numbers of edits. The network in Figure 70 does not focus on the centrality of nodes, as Figure 69 does, but on the number of contributions. The users with a significant number of edits are almost always experienced users.

Those who are inexperienced editors constitute an important number of editors in the category-network. The results are more interesting if we zoom in on the page-networks that exist within the broader category-network. In almost every page-network, there are a few inexperienced users who have only made a couple of edits (Figures 71–73). The same results appear in the other two categories. In the category “History of Science and Technology in the United States,” fifty-six percent of editors are experienced, thirty percent are marked as unknown, and fourteen percent are inexperienced (Figure 74). Most top editors are experienced and for almost every page there are a few inexperienced users, who make a few contributions (Figures 75–77). The same happens in the category “LGBT history in the United States,” where fifty percent of the involved editors are experienced, thirty-six are marked as unknown, and fourteen percent are inexperienced (Figure 78). Similarly, most top editors are experienced and a few inexperienced editors also exist for every page-network (Figures 79 and 80).

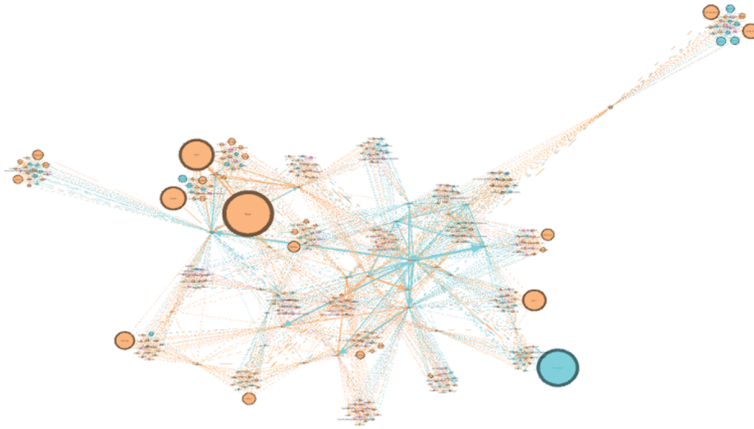


Figure 70: History of organizations based in the United States.

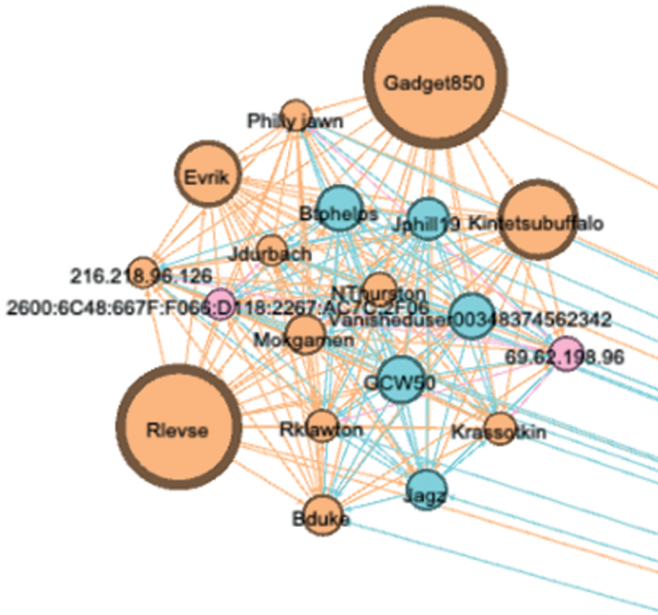


Figure 71: History of the Boy Scouts of America/History of organizations based in the United States.

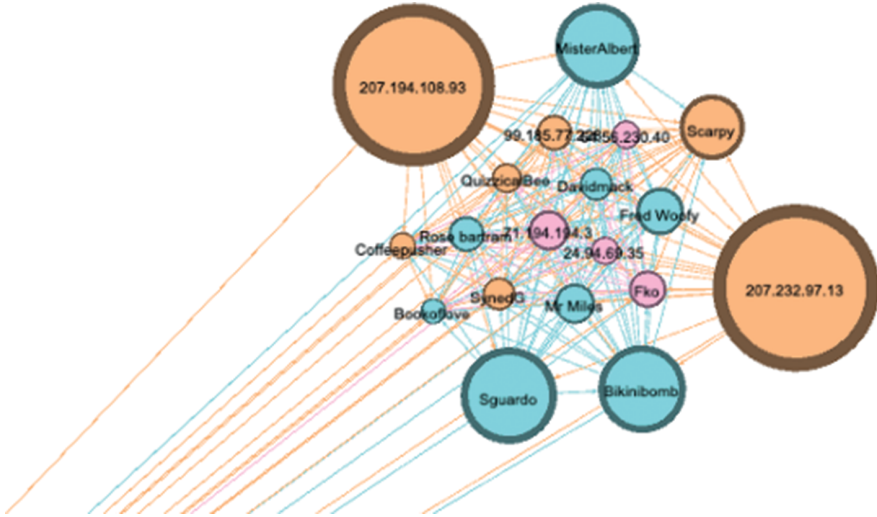


Figure 72: History of Alcoholics Anonymous/History of organizations based in the United States.

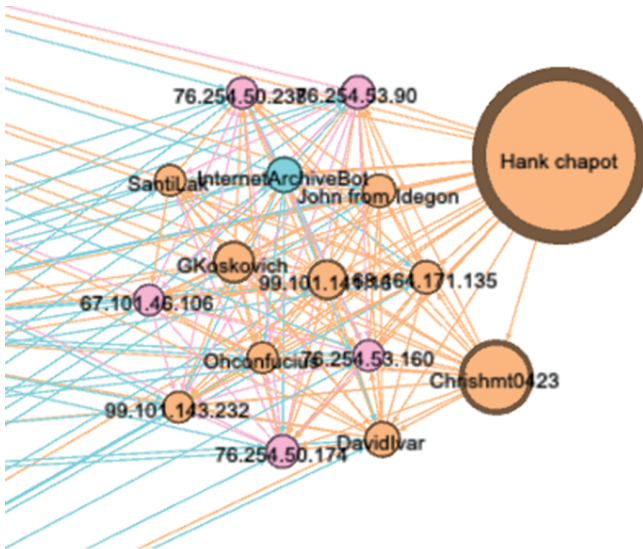
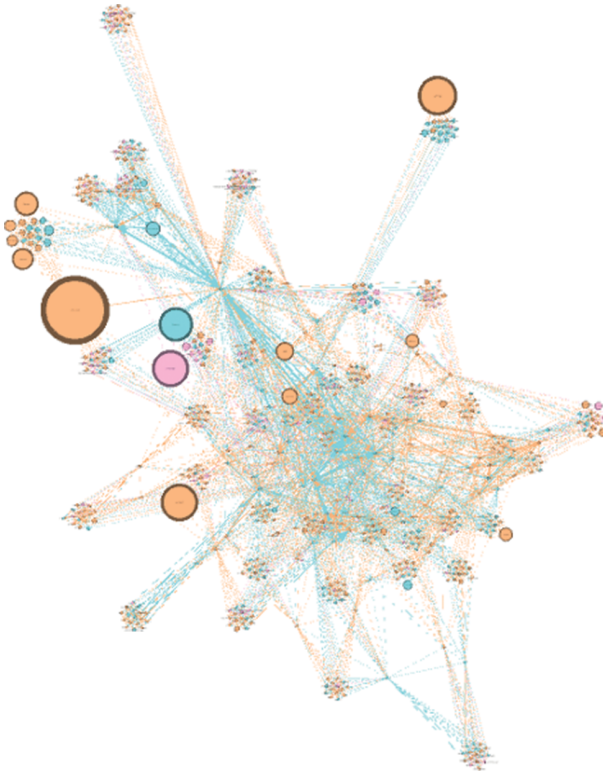
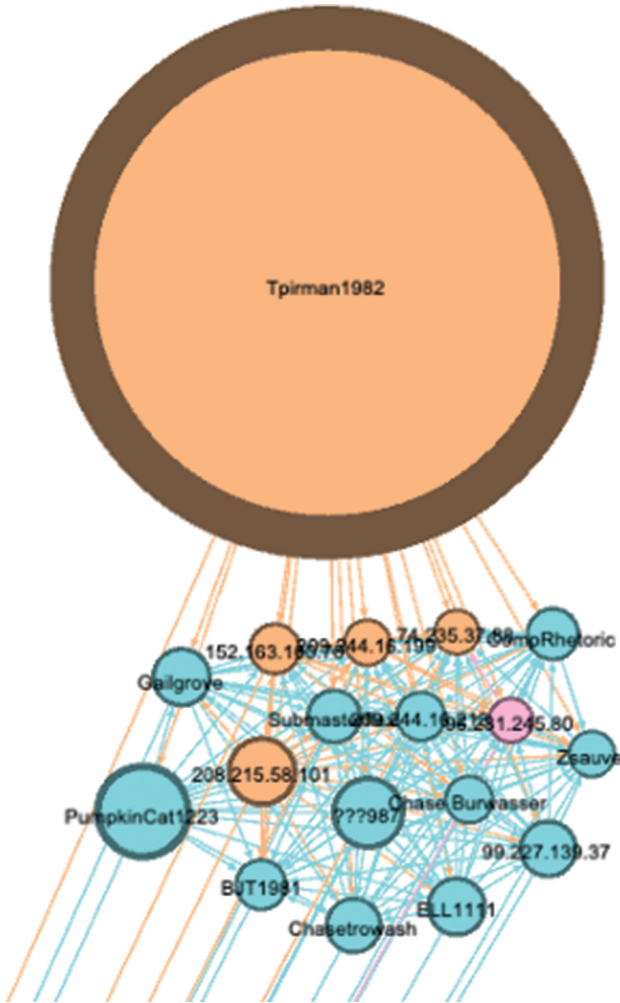


Figure 73: History of the San Francisco Police Department/History of organizations based in the United States.



**Figure 74:** History of Science and Technology in the United States.

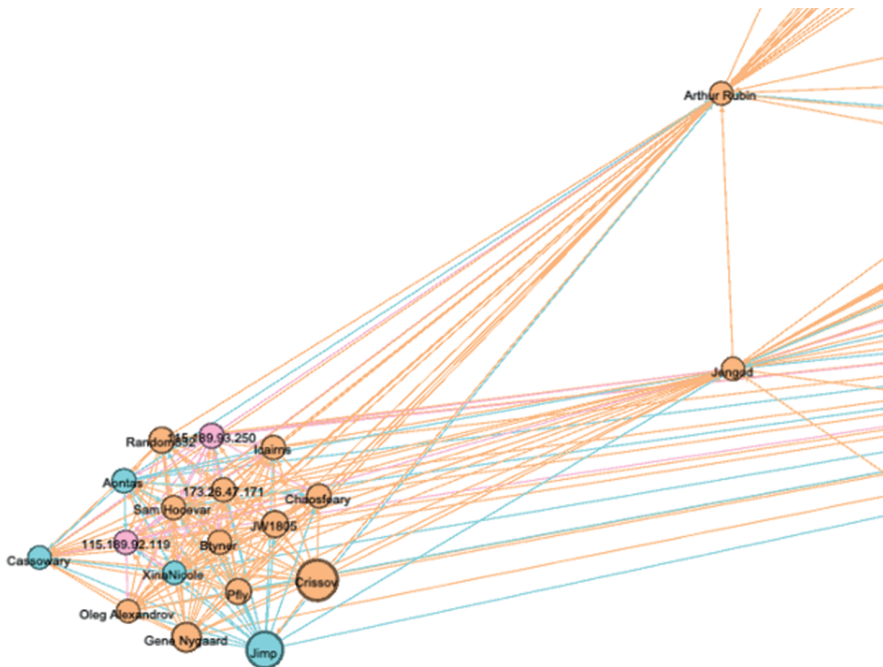
What does this repetitive pattern tell us about the editors of Wikipedia? It makes clear that there are three kinds of editors on Wikipedia: veterans, bots, and newbies. The former are experienced editors, interested either in the topic they edit or in history as a field of knowledge, and who are responsible for making the most contributions to Wikipedia. Then, we have the bots, which make only a few contributions in total but appear more frequently than any other actors in a category-network. As such, bots are the most central editors; they have the highest number of connections (edges) in a network. Their role is mostly technical and administrative but crucial for the existence of the network. Lastly, there are a bunch of editors who do not have a long history of editing experience within the Wikipedia community, but are motivated by their interest in a topic or in history itself. They make very few contributions on each page, and they are not central within the network. Typically, they only make edits in a specific article or on a topic with a broad theme, and these edits often represent their first real direct engagement with Wikipedia. These three types of editors coexist, collaborate,



**Figure 75:** History of street lighting in the United States/History of Science and Technology in the United States.

agree and disagree, share their thoughts, follow rules and policies, compete with one another, and try to seek consensus within the community in order to produce historical knowledge.

Nevertheless, the networks shown above also make it clear that on Wikipedia not all agents have the same centrality or the same number of edits in a category-network. Historical knowledge is not just the result of collaboration and public discussion, but a product of hierarchy and power. As we have seen, a few human

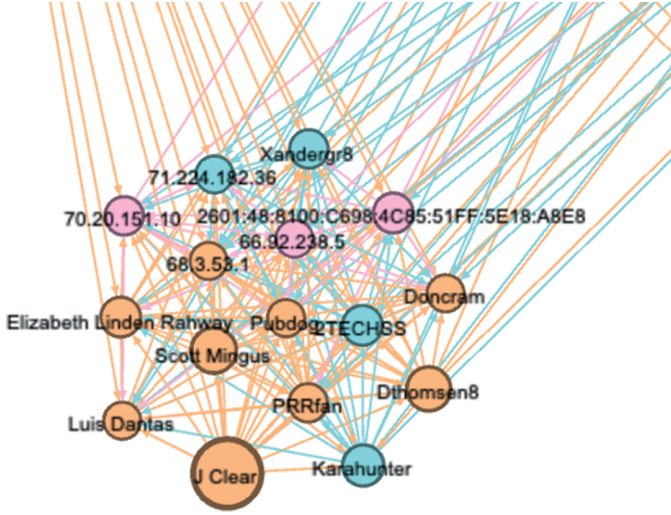


**Figure 76:** Plan for Establishing Uniformity in the Coinage, Weights, and Measures of the United States/History of Science and Technology in the United States.

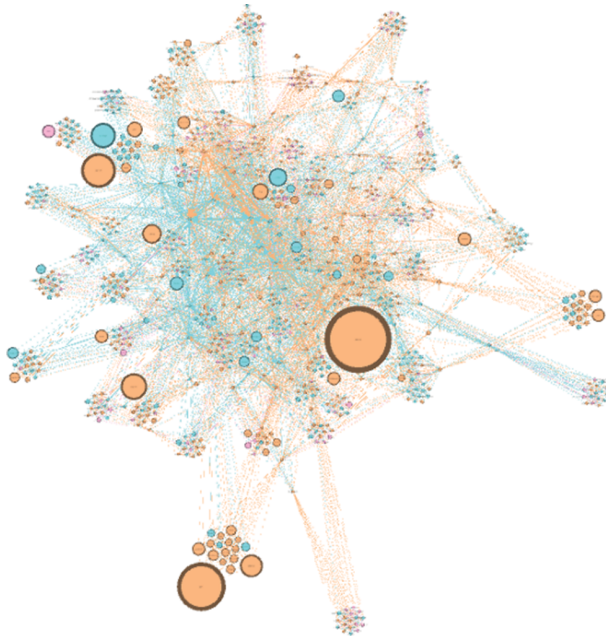
actors appear on multiple pages within a category and even one central editor, the user “Hmains,” features across three completely different and randomly selected categories. What does this mean for the democratic nature of Wikipedia? Only a few Wikipedians make a high number of contributions to each page, while the rest of the involved editors make a significantly lower number. At the same time, a few editors are central actors in the categories-networks, as they appear more frequently in the network by editing multiple pages of a category. These two types of editors control most parts of historical knowledge production on Wikipedia.

The fact that the same patterns appear across three completely different categories-networks related to history confirms the idea that we cannot hope to fully understand Wikipedia without consideration of its technological “materiality” or “digitality”.<sup>65</sup> Wikipedia is not only an encyclopedic community of peo-

<sup>65</sup> For the term “materiality” and how it is connected to Wikipedia, see Tkacz, *Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness*, 111. For the term “digitality,” see Niels Brügger, *The Archived Web: Doing History in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 5.



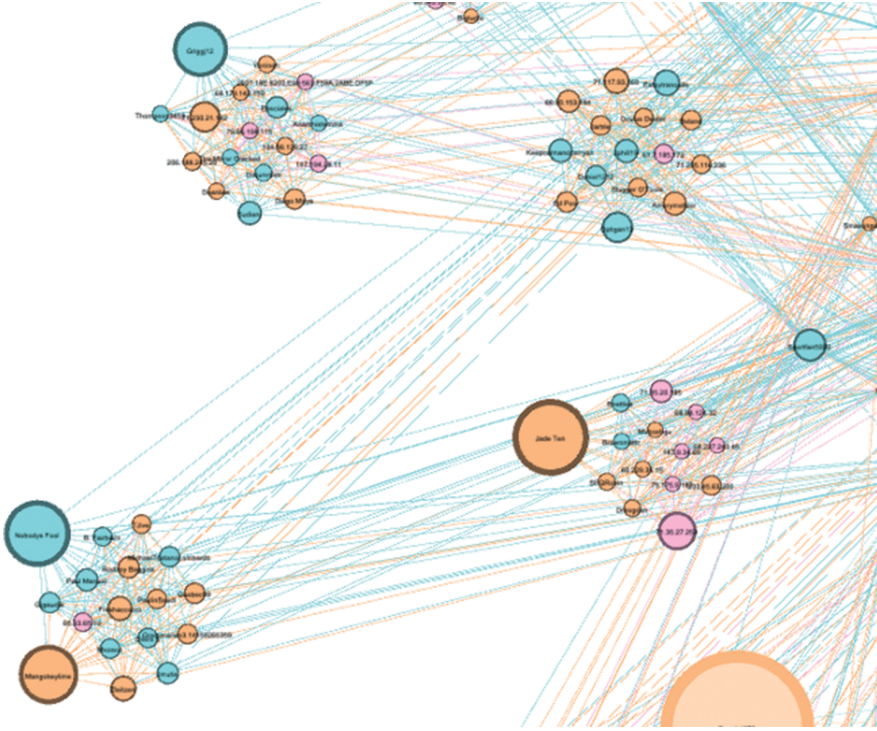
**Figure 77:** Phoenix Iron Works (Phoenixville, Pennsylvania)/History of Science and Technology in the United States.



**Figure 78:** LGBT history in the United States.







**Figure 80:** Multiple pages-networks/LGBT history in the United States.

experts in the specific historical areas in which they are interested.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, Wikipedia is a “sociotechnical” system of power and hierarchy, which determines the production of historical knowledge. In this system, all Wikipedians, whether experienced or inexperienced, can write about history, but they do not have the same level of power to make their contributions part of the main entry.

<sup>68</sup> On the expertise of Wikipedians and related problems that have occurred, see Jemelniak, *Common Knowledge?*, 105–15.

# Chapter 5

## Writing History on Wikipedia: Insights from Wikipedia Editors

All the Wikipedia pages analyzed in the previous chapters are the results of Wikipedia users' engagement with history. Any examination of that engagement depends on the lenses that we focus on it. In the previous sections, the application of quantitative or qualitative approaches led to multiple results and different arguments. However, it would be impossible to understand how historical knowledge is produced on Wikipedia without asking its main protagonists: Wikipedia editors. In this chapter, I investigate the experience of those Wikipedians who create and edit historical pages on Wikipedia. Where previous chapters focused on the comments of Wikipedia editors on the "talk pages" of Wikipedia articles, or on data that appears on editors' profile pages, the research of this section is based on an online survey. The chapter asks Wikipedia editors themselves how and why they chose to get involved in the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia.

Specifically, the chapter provides an overview of Wikipedia users' engagement with history, their editing experiences, the reasons why they edit, their historical interests, their criteria to edit or create a historical page, their personal relation with the historical topics they edit, their educational background, their collaboration with other editors, and their activity within any – history related – WikiProjects. It is worth clarifying that I have not correlated the survey responses in order to formulate different typologies of Wikipedians. Instead, the main goal of this section is to explore how and why Wikipedians engage with the production of history by asking the editors themselves. The results of the survey, and the stories that the participants shared in their answers, reveal four main characteristics about Wikipedia editors' engagement with historical knowledge. Firstly, Wikipedia users do not perceive editing or writing about history on Wikipedia as merely an activity to collect and disseminate historical knowledge. Instead, they view their editing activities more dynamically, as an enjoyable and pleasurable practice that allows them to explore the past and, in turn, to provide a better history to the public by writing, reading, and researching historical topics that they are passionate about. Secondly, Wikipedia users choose to edit or create historical pages related to topics that they are both interested in and curious to explore further. Their predetermined knowledge about a subject does not determine what historical topics they will edit or create. Instead, a variety of factors, such as the significance of a historical topic, existing errors within an article, the availability

of sources, and the lack of information in the contents of a given article, define their editing choices to an important extent. Thirdly, most Wikipedians have a personal connection to a particular topic or period of the past, which they have chosen to investigate further. The past has an intimate meaning in their lives and encourages them to transform it into history. Fourthly, for most editors, the production of historical knowledge is the result of collaborative work. However, this collaboration is not only limited to the spaces provided by the various WikiProjects; it also takes place in the spaces related to the articles themselves and any associated “talk pages”.

In the historiography of public history, there is a tendency to view the public as a consumer of historical information or as a passive receptor of historical changes that take place. This perception of the public has underestimated the active agency of the public in the construction of history. At the same time, the historiography of Wikipedia itself, to an important extent, has ignored the role of Wikipedians in the process of historical knowledge production and mainly focused on the results of that process, Wikipedia’s contents. This chapter shifts the focus from the consumers to the producers of history, and, in this case study, the Wikipedia editors, who constantly create and update Wikipedia’s articles, and have transformed Wikipedia into a public and digital source of knowledge. By studying the stories of Wikipedians, this chapter examines both how and why Wikipedia editors contribute to the production of historical knowledge.

## Design and methodology of the survey

Like Wikipedia itself, the methodology for this survey was both participatory and collaborative. Multiple steps have been followed in terms of the design of the survey and the recruitment of the participants. The initial plan was to recruit Wikipedia editors who were members of the WikiProject United States History.<sup>1</sup> The WikiProject United States History has 92 active participants and 23 inactive participants.<sup>2</sup> As Wikipedia outlines, WikiProjects are groups of people who collaborate to improve Wikipedia by focusing on a specific thematic topic area, task, or part of the encyclopedia.<sup>3</sup> The WikiProject United States History is dedicated to improving

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<sup>1</sup> “Wikipedia:WikiProject United States History,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_United\\_States\\_History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_United_States_History)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> “Wikipedia:WikiProject,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject>

the coverage of topics on United States history.<sup>4</sup> The idea was to focus on editors of Wikipedia pages related to the history of the United States since the topics that have been covered in the previous chapters – the Great Depression, the Vietnam War, the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the September 11 attacks – are also associated with the history of the United States. In addition, my plan was to follow the structure and logic of Wikipedia in how I recruited participants for the survey, and the WikiProjects constitute concrete communities of editors interested in specific historical topics and thematic areas.

The survey included the following open-ended questions: (1) How long have you been an editor on Wikipedia? (2) Why do you write about history on Wikipedia? (3) What are your historical interests in Wikipedia? (4) What are the criteria you choose to create/edit a specific historical page on Wikipedia? (5) Do you have any personal relation/identification with the topics that you choose to edit? (6) Do you have any educational background in history or other related fields? (7) How does your participation in the WikiProject work and how do you collaborate with other Wikipedians and members of the WikiProject? Because of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) restrictions, the survey was limited to participants who reside in the United States and are 18 years of age or older.

Regarding the process of recruitment, I created a Wikipedia account and started to share the survey link by posting it as a message on the “talk pages” of both the WikiProject’s members and of the WikiProject itself. Over the next two weeks, a few users responded to the survey, almost 20 participants out of the 92 active members. At the same time, some users got in touch privately to inform me that the WikiProject United States History was not particularly active and suggested that I look at more active WikiProjects related to history, such as the WikiProject Military History and the WikiProject Women in Red. The WikiProject Military History covers topics related to military history, while the WikiProject Women in Red covers topics on women’s biographies, issues, and works.<sup>5</sup>

As the response rate continued to remain low and I realized that there were more active WikiProjects, which also covered themes related to United States History, I decided to change the target group and to recruit members from the WikiProject Military History and WikiProject Women in Red. Over the next two weeks, almost 80 Wikipedia editors from the WikiProject Military History and WikiProject Women in Red took the survey and answered all the questions. In total,

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<sup>4</sup> “Wikipedia:WikiProject United States History”.

<sup>5</sup> See “Wikipedia:WikiProject Military history,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Military\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Military_history); “Wikipedia:WikiProject Women in Red,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Women\\_in\\_Red](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Women_in_Red)

100 editors responded to the survey since I sent the first messages to the members of the WikiProject United States History.

Regarding the limitations of this study, in order to take the survey the participant should reside in the United States and should not be older than 65 years old. The recruitment limitation to only US-citizens was a result of the IRB review process that the survey went through. Even though, according to Wikipedia, most editors (twenty percent) reside in the United States, there are many editors from Europe, Asia, Russia, Latin America, etc.<sup>6</sup> However, the inclusion of non-US citizens would have made the research process far more complicated, as it would require the approval of multiple agencies, which are responsible for the protection of human subjects in different locations.

## Experience, education, and the historical interests of Wikipedia editors

Before we go any further and explore how and why Wikipedia editors engage with the production of historical knowledge, it is necessary to consider the demographics of the respondents, as this can reveal significant information in terms of their respective profiles and their relation to Wikipedia. More specifically, three of the questions I asked the participants were: How long did they actively write on Wikipedia? Did they have an educational background in history or any other related fields? What were their historical interests on Wikipedia? The answers to these three questions can help us better understand the respondents of the survey and reveal useful information about the editing experience of Wikipedians and their relation to history as a research subject. As Table 1 illustrates, 44 users have been editing Wikipedia for 8–15 years, 21 users for 4–7 years, 18 users for more than 16 years, and 16 users from a few months up to 3 years. Taking into account that Wikipedia was created in 2001, Table 1 makes it clear that most participants of the survey are experienced editors. Almost 62 users out of the 99 respondents have been engaging with the production of knowledge on Wikipedia for more than eight years.

Another question that was asked of the respondents to the survey was whether or not they had any educational background in history or any other related fields. As Table 2 shows, of the 99 participants, 40 Wikipedians confirmed that they did

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding the demographics of Wikipedia users, see “Wikipedia:Wikipedians/Demographics,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians/Demographics>

have a degree in History, at undergraduate or graduate level, or at the very least had a minor in it. 38 editors had not studied History at any educational level, and 21 had studied a related field belonging to the humanities or social sciences, such as Political Science, Literature, Sociology, Anthropology, etc. At first glance, it seems unexpected that the largest portion of respondents had studied History academically. One potential explanation for this result is that those who had studied History were more aware of how historical research takes place, and thus they took the survey. Another explanation could be that a significant number of editors who are also members of WikiProjects related to history have an educational background in History. However, if we combine the two other categories, those who have not studied history and those who have studied a related field, this amounts to 59 editors. Almost 60 percent of the respondents do not have any education in History, but they are interested in history and are devoted to the coverage of historical topics on Wikipedia.

Another important characteristic of the respondents is that they have multiple historical interests, ranging across different topics, areas, chronological periods, and geographies. When it comes to the production of historical knowledge, this is a significant difference to academia, where historians are specialized in a specific chronological period and geographical area. Furthermore, academic historians tend to have studied history professionally and they are not used to collaborating with people who have either not studied history or any other related field in order to produce historical scholarship. As Table 3 outlines, Wikipedia editors cover a great variety of historical topics and themes. Most editors appear to be interested in US History, Military History, and Women's History, as those areas obviously correspond to the WikiProjects in which most of the recruited respondents participate. However, their historical interests are not only limited to those three categories but also include multiple other thematic areas, ranging from Political History, Local History, Art History, to Japanese History, African American History, and Sports History. These categories appear in the participants' responses and show how Wikipedians express their historical interests and try to classify them into broader thematic areas.

Based on the four tables, we can conclude that most participants in the survey have been editing articles on Wikipedia for between 8 to 15 years, have not studied History academically, and are mostly interested in US History, Military History, and Women's History as a result of the WikiProjects in which they are involved. There is no connection between their education and the historical interests they pursue on Wikipedia. Their responses about their interests cover a great variety of historical topics and themes, while their responses about their education show that most editors have not studied History at either an undergraduate or graduate level.

**Table 1:** How long have you been an editor on Wikipedia?

- 
1. 0–3 years – 16 users
  2. 4–7 years – 21 users
  3. 8–15 years – 44 users
  4. 16 + years – 18 users
- 

**Table 2:** Do you have any educational background in History or any other related fields?

- 
1. Yes – 40 users
  2. No – 38 users
  3. Related field – 21 users
- 

**Table 3:** What are your historical interests on Wikipedia?

- 
1. US History – 27 users
  2. Military History – 20 users
  3. Women's History – 13 users
  4. Political History – 9 users
  5. Biographies – 8 users
  6. World War II – 7 users
  7. Ancient History – 6 users
  8. Social History – 6 users
  9. Local History – 5 users
  10. Art History – 4 users
  11. British History – 4 users
  12. Early Modern History – 4 users
  13. European History – 4 users
  14. History of Religion – 4 users
  15. History of the Middle East – 4 users
  16. Japanese History – 4 users
  17. Medieval History – 4 users
  18. World War I – 4 users
  19. African History – 3 users
  20. Archaeology – 3 users
  21. Asian History – 3 users
  22. Chinese History – 3 users
  23. German History – 3 users
  24. Native American History – 3 users
  25. Sports History – 3 users
  26. African American History – 2 users
  27. Cultural History – 2 users
  28. Diplomatic History – 2 users
-



**Table 3** (continued)

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29.	History of Communism – 2 users
30.	History of Natural Disasters – 2 users
31.	History of Science – 2 users
32.	History of the Balkans – 2 users
33.	History of the Byzantine Empire – 2 users
34.	Islamic History – 2 users
35.	Islamic History – 2 users
36.	Labor History – 2 users
37.	Romanian History – 2 users
38.	Caribbean History – 1 user
39.	Economic History – 1 user
40.	Ethiopian History – 1 user
41.	French History – 1 user
42.	Geological History – 1 user
43.	History of Animals – 1 user
44.	History of Crimes – 1 user
45.	History of Explorations – 1 user
46.	History of Literature – 1 user
47.	History of Migration – 1 user
48.	History of Spaceflight – 1 user
49.	History of the American Left – 1 user
50.	History of the Mongol Empire – 1 user
51.	History of the Ottoman Empire – 1 user
52.	History of Uniforms – 1 user
53.	Indian History – 1 user
54.	Korean History – 1 user
55.	Legal History – 1 user
56.	Music History – 1 user
57.	Naval History – 1 user
58.	Nicaraguan History – 1 user
59.	Rural History – 1 user
60.	Russian History – 1 user
61.	Urban History – 1 user
62.	Vietnam War – 1 user

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## Reasons for writing about history on Wikipedia

There is an obvious but – unfortunately – neglected question about Wikipedia editors' involvement with the production of historical knowledge: Why do they spend their time writing about history on Wikipedia? To get a fuller sense of how historical knowledge is produced on Wikipedia, we need to better understand the reasons why Wikipedians decide to write about history.

In response to the question about why they write about history on Wikipedia, the most common answer from the largest number of respondents was that they enjoyed reading, writing, and conducting research about history. This type of response appeared in 58 comments from the Wikipedians surveyed. “I love learning, research and writing, and WP gives me the opportunity to do all three,” one Wikipedia user mentioned. They went on to say: “When I was in college and would get an assignment to do a research paper, I would go to the library and start that very day. Plus, I’m good at it”. Another participant wrote, “I enjoy it, I like to get good history out there,” and a Wikipedia user interested in biographies added, “I enjoy writing non-fiction and doing research. Wikipedia [sic] has been a productive outlet for those hobbies which seems like it benefits others. I also like the idea that my work sees the light of day”. Engaging with history on Wikipedia appears to be an enjoyable activity that allows editors to read, write, and conduct research about history. It enables them to expand their historical interests and investigate more historical topics and themes. As one Wikipedian explained, “I like to read about history. I like researching historical topics and sharing historical information that is not available on Wikipedia”. Along similar lines, two other editors stated: “I write about history on Wikipedia as I enjoy it,” and “I enjoy studying and writing about history in my spare time”. The largest number of respondents, it seems, engage with history because they enjoy multiple aspects of historical knowledge production, such as writing, editing, and researching historical topics. As another editor wonderfully revealed: “I find it enjoyable to research long-forgotten settlements, and [sic] bring them back to life”.

The practice of editing and creating historical pages on Wikipedia also appears to be an entertaining and pleasurable activity. “From a young age I have enjoyed history very much,” writes one Wikipedia user, “When other kids were outside playing, or inside playing video games, I was reading, consuming historical knowledge before I was even in middle school. I am not sure why it is so pleasurable [sic] and entertaining to learn about and discuss history, but nevertheless my interest in history is very high. This is why I both contribute to and read history on Wikipedia”. A further user suggests that “It’s fun, I [sic] learn things, and I help others learn,” and another reveals that “Its [sic] one of my favorite subjects. I love to learn how people in the past were very much like us”. Their involvement in the production of historical knowledge, then, appears to be a fun activity, a hobby with which Wikipedians love to engage. “I’ve been personally interested in history since middle school. Wikipedia editing about history is thus an extension of my hobby,” one Wikipedia editor explained. Editing or creating historical articles on Wikipedia constitutes a manifestation of the passion that many Wikipedians have for history as a subject. “I’m drawn to editing topics I’m interested in, and history has long been a passion of mine,” wrote another Wiki-

pedia user. Wikipedia provides a public space, where users can pursue their passions and engage with what they love. This is reflected in many responses, where several participants use terms such as “love,” “hobby,” “fun,” “entertaining,” “passion,” and “enjoy”. As one editor mentioned, describing their engagement with history, “I have no means by which to publish a book easily and with Wikipedia I can use my love of history”. Likewise, another editor wrote: “History is a subject I love to study, and it is an opportunity to make the knowledge more widely available to people”.

Wikipedia users write about history on Wikipedia not only because it is a fun and pleasurable activity that they love to do, but also because they want to provide “better history” on Wikipedia. This reason appeared in 37 comments and constituted the second most frequently cited factor that prompted these users to take part in the production of history on Wikipedia. For many users, history on Wikipedia requires corrections and updates, and, therefore, they engage with historical articles to provide better historical knowledge about the past to the public. Many users expressed the need to correct the past, expand upon it, and represent it in a better way. As one editor mentioned: “Sometimes I see history that is either so sparse or so bad I feel a compelling need to either expand it or correct it”. “I feel strongly that people should have free access to accurate and properly sourced information,” another user reported. As professional historians do, Wikipedia editors participate in the production of historical knowledge to fill in gaps that exist in their areas of specialization. They detect inaccuracies and misrepresentations of information, and they decide to edit historical articles or create new ones. “I started because I found some wild inaccuracies in my area of specialization (US Air Force and predecessors),” clarified one Wikipedia user, “I continued primarily because of the incompleteness of articles in this area”. Another Wikipedia editor explained, “I started off just casually cleaning up incorrect or poorly substantiated material on Wikipedia that irked me and gradually became a regular contributor”. A further user added, “I started by writing about things that were not in Wikipedia or were not well covered. I continue to fill in blanks and improve references”. One of the most interesting answers came from another editor, who wrote: “I believe that a complete and accurate understanding of history is essential to being a good citizen”. For this user, providing better history on Wikipedia and having access to it is essential for someone to be a good citizen. In many responses, good knowledge of history does not only mean a good understanding of the past, but also a better awareness of the present. Wikipedians feel obliged to produce historical knowledge that is accurate, complete, and based on reliable sources.

However, providing better history does not only signify that the historical knowledge will be more accurate, but that it will also offer a more balanced historical narrative about the past. In other words, for many Wikipedians better history

means non-biased historical articles. As one Wikipedia editor wrote, concerning their engagement with historical writing on Wikipedia, “I specifically work to reduce systematic biases and increase Wikipedia’s coverage of historically marginalized groups”. Another editor added, “[I write] to redress the imbalance of writing on women’s history”. These editors see their participation in Wikipedia as a practice to redress the biases around women’s history, indigenous people’s history, the history of social minorities, the history of the non-western world, and other neglected historical topics. As one editor put it, “[I write on Wikipedia] to reduce the load of BS, usually political, but sometimes based on gender, ethnicity, etc”. Another editor stated: “I want to encourage more understanding of topics often dismissed or overlooked, like Indigenous history, women’s history, the history of defunct institutions, rural society, etc”. A further editor, who writes about Japanese history on Wikipedia, pointed out: “I felt I was helping contribute to combatting Eurocentrism and so forth”. The problems that characterize Wikipedia articles, such as bias, gender imbalance, Eurocentrism, etc., do not appear to turn users away from the site. Instead, these existing issues seem to motivate users to not only remain active but also strive to provide a better history of the past. As one user put it: “The history of my region is poorly represented, and largely written from the perspective of the coloniser [sic], not the people whose history it is. So it’s important for me to make this better, in some small way”.

The third reason why Wikipedia editors decide to write about history on Wikipedia is to make history more accessible to the public. It is not only important to produce accurate historical knowledge about the past but also to share it with the public. Wikipedia provides that opportunity, as it is a digital public space to which anyone can have access. These Wikipedians consider this opportunity valuable, which they then take up to both produce “better history” and disseminate it to a broader audience. This underlying reason appeared in 21 comments from the respondents. For example, one editor, outlining why they write about history on Wikipedia, explained it quite simply: “To pass on what I know”. Another goes into more detail: “I write about history to make the knowledge I receive [sic] as a graduate student accessible to as many people as possible (for free, online). I believe that this is an important step in making formerly ‘gatekept’ knowledge more freely accessible”. Two other editors said: “I feel like I should share the knowledge I have, and in turn help others find the information they are looking for,” and “In order to inform a wider audience about interesting, often obscure, details and events”. The significance of making history accessible to the public is obvious throughout many of the comments. Editors see Wikipedia as a digital space where they can share their own writings about history and disseminate them to the public. As one editor put it: “I want to be a part of something greater than myself”. Another user added: “Once something is on Wikipedia, it is also much

easier to find (than, say, in an old book or newspaper article), so I'll also write with the hope it makes historical information more accessible to others". Wikipedians are aware that the historical knowledge they produce will be stored in a digital and public encyclopedia, which is visited daily by millions of users. Therefore, they will make "the historical record available for public consumption".

Preventing history from getting lost or being forgotten constitutes the fourth reason why Wikipedians participate in the production of history. For 13 respondents, history on Wikipedia cannot be easily lost, as it is posted online in a digital space to which the public has constant access. For this reason, Wikipedians feel obliged to produce historical knowledge and store it on Wikipedia, as they wish to prevent the past from falling into obscurity. As one editor argued: "I am a skilled, experienced, retired writer and I want to add new historical entries to Wikipedia, specifically about women who made a difference in their time but are in danger of having their stories lost if they are not added to Wiki". Writing about history on Wikipedia signifies a way to honor the memory of people who died in the past and whose stories should not be lost, especially those who belong to social minorities and communities underrepresented on Wikipedia, such as women, black people, indigenous people, labor workers, immigrants, etc. "I feel that often people forget where we come from if the information isn't easy to access," one editor writes, "I try to also write about BIPOC history since that history isn't as recorded/in our collective concious [sic]". Another argues: "It's a way of paying back the working-class people of Britain who paid for my education".

For many Wikipedia users, the production of history on Wikipedia plays an important role in what people learn from history and remember about the past. Wikipedia "helps us remember people and events that deserve to be documented," one editor notes. Another editor, who was interested in naval history, writes: "I feel like every ship did it's bit for country [sic] and deserves to not be forgotten, no matter how insignificant it may seem". Wikipedia works as a space where users can contribute to the preservation and remembrance of the past. In this way, the public will learn about the past and will not repeat the mistakes of the past in the future. As one Wikipedia editor pointed out: "I would like to report that it is from some high ideals in the service of humanity, perhaps from Santayana's idea that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". Many editors expressed the need to write about histories that should not be lost or forgotten. The online encyclopedia offers them the opportunity to collect and disseminate the histories of the past, so they will not "get lost to eternity," as one user mentioned.

Writing about history on Wikipedia not only means shedding light on distant events of the past but also investigating historical topics and themes strongly connected to the lives of Wikipedia editors. This line of reasoning appeared in 6 comments. Some editors see Wikipedia as a chance to explore their family history

and to learn more about their intimate pasts. For example, one Wikipedian explained: “I am interest [sic] in an ancestor, Lord Alfred Milner”. Another editor described their engagement with historical writing on Wikipedia in the following terms: “I found it a useful means to apply knowledge I had gained in the course of researching family history, and then to continue learning and extend my curiosity and knowledge to new areas”. It is not only the history of their families but also the broader historical events in which their families have been involved that inspires these editors. “My father was a World War II combat vet,” one user explains, “I became interested in history at a young age, especially World War II. I started reading about the war; causes and courses”. Their personal experiences of the past lead some Wikipedians to investigate further and turn their experiences and memories into historical knowledge. “I used to fly combat in an airplane with about the same performance as World War I aircraft,” another editor revealed, “This led me to write about WWI aces, as well as the so-called Laotian Civil War”.

The responses of Wikipedia users emphasize that, for most Wikipedians, writing about history on Wikipedia constitutes an enjoyable and pleasurable activity, which includes the practices of reading, writing, doing research, and learning about history. This means that Wikipedia enables users to discover their own research interests, and read and write about topics that they both enjoy and love to learn about. In addition to this, many Wikipedians see writing about history as an activity designed to provide more complete, less biased, and accurate historical knowledge to the public. Not only do they wish to write about the past, but they also want to provide a more inclusive historical narrative about the past. They consider their engagement with history as a means to better educate all online visitors to the encyclopedia and, importantly, to prevent many historical stories from getting lost or being forgotten.

**Table 4:** Why do you write about history on Wikipedia?

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1. Enjoy reading, writing, and researching history – 58 comments
  2. Provide better history on Wikipedia – 37 comments
  3. Make history more accessible to the public – 21 comments
  4. Prevent history from getting lost or being forgotten – 13 comments
  5. Conduct research on their personal and family history – 6 comments
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## Criteria for Wikipedians to create or edit a historical article

In the section above, I investigated the reasons why Wikipedia editors write about history on Wikipedia. This question focused on the broader engagement of Wikipedia users with history on Wikipedia but did not necessarily shed any light on the criteria Wikipedia editors follow when choosing to edit or create specific historical pages. The next section explores this criteria, examining when Wikipedians decide to approach a historical topic on Wikipedia, and how and why they choose one historical theme from another.

The most common criterion (39 comments) appears to be Wikipedia editors' personal interest in the topic they edit or create. In most responses, Wikipedians argued that they choose a topic based on whether they have an interest in it. In many comments, personal interest seems to be a broad, umbrella term that usually determines Wikipedians' first encounter with the relevant themes and topics they wish to further investigate. It is "Generally something I have an interest in," writes one editor. Another explains: "I am usually working on one article [sic] and I will read something in my research that I am I want to [sic] learn more about. I will look to see if there is a Wikipedia article, and if not, I will put that subject on a list. I also read books and get ideas". Other frequent comments were: "Anything that interests me," "They are interesting to me," "It is of interest to me. I wish to read about it," "If they are about a topic I am interested in," "The only criteria I have is that it grabs my interest," "I find the topic interesting enough to sink time into it," etc. This criterion governs most editors' decisions on what to examine and study on Wikipedia. However, personal interest is a fairly vague term and does not reveal much about Wikipedia editors' editing choices.

The significance and notability of a topic is the second most frequently cited criterion, appearing in 26 comments. For many editors, the topic they intend to cover should be an important one. As some editors mentioned in their responses, when considering writing about a topic they often ask themselves: "Is this topic 'noteworthy'?" "Does it meet notability guidelines," "Does it have broader importance: for example, is the event or person a 'model' for some other place or person?" One editor also points out: "I choose to write articles on topics that do not currently have an article, and are topics that I feel are significant or particularly notable". The criterion relating to notability complies with the notability policy of Wikipedia, which states that editors should create a new article about a topic that is deemed to be significant.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on the policy of notability, see: "Wikipedia:Notability," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability>

The third most frequent criterion, when it comes to editing or creating pages, is to correct existing errors or any potential misinformation within a Wikipedia article. This criterion appeared in 24 responses. For example, one editor, who is interested in military history, stated that they start editing an article if they feel that “it needs more information” or “it needs better sources or a piece of information needs to be backed up by a source”. Many editors take advantage of the fact that Wikipedia allows for the constant revision of its contents. In this way, these users become engaged with the production of historical knowledge by trying to improve the contents of Wikipedia articles. Similar answers were also given by other participants. “I chose to devote time to two pages of women who wrote Latin [ . . . ] because their pages were either very incomplete or missing some info that I could fill in based on my area of expertise (Latin/classical languages),” said one editor, who is interested in women’s history. Another user mentioned that they were often prompted to act “If the page looks sparse and needs some help or doesn’t exist. Sometimes there will be a lot of unsourced information that I notice that I feel needs a lot of help and always use my own words and/or quoted material with inline references in order to improve the article”. All these users approach a historical article because they want to improve its contents about history, further develop its historical narrative, and to add more and better sources. However, they are not only motivated by a desire to include more relevant information. These users are also devoted to technical tasks, such as the correction of spelling and grammar mistakes. As one editor explained: “I usually rewrite existing articles that are badly out of date, have a recognizable bias, contain error, are under or badly referenced, contain original research, that kind of thing. [ . . . ] I’m a remodeler, not a builder. If an article is in bad shape, I’m there”. Another Wikipedia user wrote: “I leave the major revisions to those with the time to do that. I only rarely make any large edits anymore. Mostly its [sic] fixing typos, misspellings, clumsy grammar, and the like”.

Wikipedia editors can edit or create a historical page if they have adequate sources to support their historical arguments. The availability of sources is the fourth most frequently cited criterion, appearing in 22 comments. “Availability of high-quality sources (good newspaper articles or peer-reviewed journals) that strike my personal interest” was what one editor stated was their criteria to edit a historical article. A similar response was given by another editor interested in women’s history: “I look for good reference material, for good causes that these women pursued, for women outside the U.S. (mostly), for interesting stories that make for an interesting entry”. Another user devoted to the coverage of historical weather events outlined the need to “have plenty of information on [the] subject, [for a record of the event to] be on some type of historical archive, and [to] have interviews with people or [other forms of] documentation such as images of the



event”. Another editor gave a more detailed answer about the availability of sources being a criterion to edit a Wikipedia page: “Finding good sources. We often prefer historical works written by professional historians, but they are not always available. Then we might have to rely on a variety of primary sources (administrator reports, travelogues, etc.) and sift them to find the highlights [sic]. Another problem is when history is contested, even by professional historians. Then Wikipedia guidelines requires [sic] we present all viewpoints. Finding the right balance between them requires judgement [sic]”. The availability of verifiable sources is also heavily stressed in one of Wikipedia’s policies, which states that articles on Wikipedia should be based on verifiable sources and published information.<sup>8</sup> For Wikipedia editors intent on following this policy, then, the availability of sources becomes a significant prerequisite when choosing to start editing an article. Wikipedia does not allow editors to conduct original research, so they need to turn to secondary sources to study a topic further and produce historical knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

The fifth criterion for Wikipedians when it comes to selecting an article for editing is because they want to investigate neglected historical events, topics, or figures of the past. References to this criterion appeared in 20 responses. “I like to create/edit pages on events or people who are important but either neglected or misinterpreted in modern discourse,” wrote one editor, who is interested in the history of the Balkans. Another editor said that they were most often motivated “when I realize there is a huge gap of knowledge that screams out to be filled”. Along similar lines, one Wikipedia user noted: “I’ll usually write about a person or subject I consider to be ‘missing’ from Wikipedia”. Editors look at the gaps that exist on Wikipedia and aim to fill them by adding more articles or updating existing ones.

The least frequent criterion (10 comments) relates to the knowledge that Wikipedians already have of a topic. “The main subject is something I’ve [sic] very knowledgeable about, so I will sometimes click through wiki-links to see what needs doing,” wrote one editor. Another user referred to having “Some amount of background knowledge of the topic”. It is apparent that only a few Wikipedians chose to edit or create a historical page based on the knowledge they already have about a certain thematic area, research subject, or time period. This is interesting as it suggests that editors prefer to find a topic, which they are interested in and passionate about, and then explore it further by reading and writing about it as opposed to simply transmitting any knowledge that they already had. They

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<sup>8</sup> For the policy of verifiability, see: “Wikipedia:Verifiability,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability>

<sup>9</sup> For the policy of no original research, see “Wikipedia:No original research,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 10, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No\\_original\\_research](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research)

see Wikipedia as a place where they are able to both learn about the past and to produce history themselves. Their knowledge about a subject does not determine what pages they will edit or create on Wikipedia. It is their curiosity, their personal interest in a topic, and their willingness to investigate it more fully that defines their editing choices to a large extent. After this, the significance of a historical topic, the existing errors in an article, the availability of sources, and the broader epistemological gaps are the relevant factors that guide editors' decisions over which historical article they will aim to further develop.

**Table 5:** What are the criteria you choose to create or edit a historical page on Wikipedia?

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1.	Personal interest in the topic – 39 comments
2.	Significance/notability – 26 comments
3.	Correcting existing errors and misinformation in the Wikipedia articles – 24 comments
4.	Availability of sources – 22 comments
5.	Neglected historical events, topics, figures, etc. – 20 comments
6.	Knowledge of the subject – 10 comments

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## Personal relation to the historical topics that Wikipedians write about

Tables 4 and 5 illustrate the reasons why Wikipedia users write about history and the criteria they use to choose a topic for editing. Based on their comments, they have developed multiple perceptions of history and different perspectives about what needs coverage on Wikipedia. One more question that the participants of the survey were also asked was if they have any personal connection to the historical topics they choose to edit or create. Most of them answered that they do have a personal association with the historical articles they edit or create. As Table 6 shows, 58 users admitted having some form of relation to the historical topics with which they engage, while 37 users rejected any personal association with the articles they edit. Table 6 provides an overview of whether these users have a personal connection to the past or not. Nevertheless, their comments are not simply yes or no answers but reveal crucial details about how editors encounter the past and the role that history plays in their personal lives.

“I served in the U.S. military in Korea for several years as a Korean linguist,” writes one Wikipedia editor interested in Korean history, “I was ignorant and naive back then, and didn’t think much about why I was there until after I left. After I left the peninsula, I found myself wondering about the conditions that led to the Korean War and ultimately my arrival in Korea. That curiosity drove me to

study Korean history”. This is by no means an exceptional response to the question. Many editors are influenced by their personal experiences from the past, which prompts them to investigate these experiences more fully and make them part of Wikipedia’s historical knowledge. “I spent 30 years in the Army Medical Department,” explains another editor interested in military history, “20 years of it as a trained military medical historian. I served in two of the organizations whose articles I worked on [ . . .]”. Another user, also interested in topics related to military history, added: “I come from an extensive military family (36 members). I myself am military of 3 years and a former cadet of 6 years”. Similarly, a further editor revealed: “My father fought in the Second World War, and I’ve made a couple of minor edits to events in which he participated. My edits are based on sources other than ‘stuff my dad told me’”. It is not only their own personal connection to historical events of the past but also their families’ experiences that attract some editors to the topics they choose to edit. As one user, who writes about the history of World War II, stated: “Numerous family [sic] fought in the Second World War. As part of my family research, I study the Second World War. This links into what and why I edit on the wiki”.

Wikipedia editors do not only edit articles based on their personal connection to a specific event of the past. Their identities and personal beliefs are also factors that make them choose topics for further development. “I’m a woman who wonders why women’s history isn’t better covered,” writes one user. “My person(al) relation is only through my studies and that I identify as a woman,” adds another user who is also interested in women’s history. A further editor commented: “I am a woman and I like to edit articles on women’s history. The two cultures I enjoy editing the most are Roman history and Norse history, probably because I’m half Spanish half Swedish”. Gendered and national identities determine Wikipedians’ encounters with history and their engagement with Wikipedia. Their identities define the historical topics to which these users contribute. As one editor interested in women’s and indigenous history wrote: “I’m a woman who attended a women’s college, so that played a part in that specific interest [ . . .] I’m Bahamian-American and I live near two federal tribal reservations. I speak Irish, so I read a lot of Irish-language media and get information from there that I want to share”. The identities of Wikipedians are formed and influenced by their experiences of the past, which are crucial for both how they perceive historical knowledge and their desire to produce and disseminate it to the public.

However, it is not only their identities but also their personal beliefs that shape their historical interests within the Wikipedia community. For example, one editor interested in the history of socialism and communism pointed out: “As a communist, learning about the history of the socialist movement is a useful tool in being able to apply methods and practices that could help affect material

change in my society”. Another editor responded in a similar manner: “I was once a major-party candidate (unsuccessful) for the state legislature, and I edit about legislators and legislatures. I am an official in my union, and I edit about labor history. I’m left-of-center by American standards, and I edit about the history of the American left. I used to work in my state’s revenue department, and I edit articles about some tax-avoidance schemes and scams”. Ideologies and personal beliefs are both vivid and present in the lives of these editors and, thus, define their historical interests on Wikipedia.

Another form that editors’ personal relation to the past can take is their connection to the place they were born, grew up in, or have lived near. “Yes, I often write about Australian topics, and I am Australian,” responded one editor. “I often edit pages on local landmarks that are geographically close to me because I have some background knowledge on the topic already, and know where to find reliable sources,” explained another. It is not only about the places where people come from or have lived but also the places they have visited. “I’ve gone on vacations just to take photos of places, which I add to Wikipedia articles,” answered one editor interested in the history of cities in the United States. “I have lived in Japan so that connects me to topics on Japan,” another editor interested in Japanese history noted. A further user stated: “My only personal connections with most of the subjects that I write about are geographical in nature, as they are related to a place that I have lived or am familiar with (Maryland, D.C., Virginia, West Virginia, etc.)”. Wikipedia editors are fascinated to cover historical topics related to places they have either lived in or have visited. Both the knowledge and the personal memories they have from their connections to those places affect them and make them interested in developing related Wikipedia articles. “It’s my history, my region’s history,” as one editor put it.

Another manifestation of Wikipedians’ personal relation to the topics they edit or create is their family history or, more broadly, the history of their relatives. Experiences and memories that have marked these users’ family history often sees them devoted to the coverage of related topics. Judging by the responses, the examination of these topics helps certain users to better explore the history of their ancestors, encourages them to create a historical entry on Wikipedia or improve an existing one, and, ultimately, allows them to honor the memory of their families. As one Wikipedian illustrated: “In some cases, I have relatives who were participants as soldiers in World War II battles to which I have made minor edits. While studying abroad in Greece, I met an elderly relative who remembered Allied bombing raids against the occupying Axis forces during World War II that killed Greek civilians, several of whom she knew personally. (That particular bombing is not documented in any academic sources I can find, but it appears in Greek and English-language blog sources – one of the reasons that I do

not always dismiss blog references, although I prefer other sources when possible). [. . .] So, I would say that yes, my family background and my choices of what to study early in life have perhaps affected what I am most interested in and capable of writing about now, but I don't necessarily have to personally identify with a topic in order to contribute something". The problem of sources was also evident in a response by another user, who wanted to cover topics related to their family history but could not find any reliable sources: "So far I have rarely edited articles on topics that are somehow related to my ancestors, mainly due to the lack of access to reliable sources. I will definitively try to do so if the opportunity arises, as I see this as an opportunity to honor them". Editors interested in their families' history seek to maintain a balance between their personal connection to the topic and their desire to produce an accurate historical narrative. They try to find reliable sources, as Wikipedia demands, and to produce non-biased historical knowledge about those topics. As one editor mentioned: "When it comes to genealogy or history that my ancestors were involved in, I will try to contribute as best as I can. I try to avoid bias and to be as clear as possible in whatever personal only connected articles I work on". Another editor explained: "Because I had been working quite intensively in family history, I had read histories of places and times where family members had been. I worked to introduce such updated information into relevant articles on Wikipedia". The fact that some Wikipedians have a personal association with the pages they edit does not prevent them from writing about them; however, they try to ensure that their edits and contributions remain within the appropriate framework that Wikipedia has created.

Even though Wikipedians' personal relations to the topics they decide to edit did not come up in the previous sections (see Tables 4 and 5), when the respondents were directly asked whether or not they did have a personal connection to the topics they choose to edit, most of them answered yes. Wikipedia's policies and guidelines, however, state that a personal association with a topic is not allowed. It is possible, then, that many of these users chose not to disclose their personal association when discussing the reasons why they write about history on Wikipedia or outlining their criteria when it comes to editing/creating historical articles.

At the same time, it is apparent that the past has a significant presence in the lives of Wikipedians. This presence of the past can take multiple forms: a direct experience from the past, a family memory related to the past, their identities, personal beliefs, the places where they have lived or visited, the history of their families and their ancestors. This point would seem to comply with the study of Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, who showed that the past has an intimate

presence in the lives of American people.<sup>10</sup> This presence makes Americans turn to the past to answer questions about the present, such as where they come from, where they are going, who they are, and how they want to be remembered.<sup>11</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen's argument characterizes how Wikipedia editors understand the past and engage with it to produce historical knowledge.

However, in Rosenzweig and Thelen's work, the interviewees feel close to the past when they are in museums or at family gatherings. At these settings, they can identify themselves as being in the past due to their proximity to historical objects and other family members, who presumably share family histories, and with whom they can develop personal relationships.<sup>12</sup> On Wikipedia this does not happen. Editors are members of a digital and impersonal community, often they do not personally know each other and have probably never met their co-editors, there are no authentic artifacts of the past, and having a personal relation to the topic they edit is not encouraged by Wikipedia. Nevertheless, Wikipedians' responses reveal that they go beyond what Wikipedia encourages, develop personal connections to historical topics that they want to examine further, and, even more significantly, they do not only turn to the past in order to understand themselves and build relationships but also to contribute to the production of historical knowledge. This is more attuned to what the historian, Benjamin Filene, has argued about the "outsider history-makers" (genealogists, reenactors, heritage tourism developers), who view the past as a living and emotional resource that makes them create passionate histories.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, on Wikipedia, the presence of the past is not an individualistic matter, as it leads to the collective action of providing better history and making historical knowledge more accessible to the public.

**Table 6:** Do you have any personal relation/ association with the topics that you choose to edit?

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1. Yes – 58 users
  2. No – 37 users
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<sup>10</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Filene, "Passionate Histories: 'Outsider' History-Makers and What They Teach Us," 11.

## A collaborative production of historical knowledge

All the participants of the study are members of three WikiProjects, the WikiProject United States History, the WikiProject Military History, and the WikiProject Women in Red, or at least this was how the recruitment process took place. Another question respondents were asked was how their participation in the WikiProjects works when they edit or create a historical article on Wikipedia. Do they write alone and independently? Do they collaborate with other Wikipedians or other members of the WikiProjects? Based on their responses, I created Tables 7 and 8 and tried to explore how their engagement with the production of historical knowledge takes place. According to Table 7, most Wikipedians (40 users) edit alone, 25 users edit as members of the WikiProject, in which they participate, and 18 users edit both independently and as members of a WikiProject.

These results illustrate that even though Wikipedia promotes the WikiProjects as groups of contributors “who want to work together as a team to improve Wikipedia,” they do not always practically serve that purpose – at least not in the view of most interviewees.<sup>14</sup> Many respondents mentioned that they “seldom, if ever” make edits through a WikiProject, or revealed that they mostly work by themselves. “Mostly on my own with references I have or that are available online,” “mostly solo, with some collaboration with other editors,” “mostly solo, collaboration online,” “I usually am pretty independent and do not collaborate with anyone,” “I tend to do things on my own,” “I tend not to collaborate,” “I generally do not collaborate directly with other project members,” are some of the answers the respondents gave to describe their non-participation in WikiProjects and the independent character of their editing activities. WikiProjects work in terms of being communities of people who share common interests in historical topics and themes, but not necessarily as groups of people who work together and edit articles collaboratively. As two editors put it: “I am a member of some projects, but so far in my experience there isn’t really that much direct collaboration” and “I am more of a ‘lone wolf’ and do not collaborate. I have joined some groups, but I don’t see much of a community that motivates me to make frequent edits”.

On the other hand, some editors who actively participate in WikiProjects revealed in their responses some useful information on the role of WikiProjects in the production of historical knowledge. One editor, probably a member of the WikiProject United States History, offered a detailed observation on their participation in the WikiProject:

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<sup>14</sup> “Wikipedia:WikiProject”.

My participation in WikiProject United States History has been limited to tagging relevant article talk pages so that those pages will be linked with the WikiProject, and can therefore be patrolled, rated for classification and importance, and monitored by more active users in the project. Most of the articles that I write fall within the topic of United States History, so I ensure they include the template for this WikiProject on their talk pages. I tend to write about United States History articles, and then ensure that they are properly linked with this WikiProject. In addition, as part of my participation in WikiProject West Virginia, I classify and rate the importance of West Virginia-related articles, and add the WikiProject United States template (and classification and rating) where appropriate. I find that the WikiProjects are especially helpful for prioritizing article improvement based on their importance and significance, and being able to monitor activity across a broad array of articles of related interest (i.e. articles for deletion, etc.)

A similar experience was shared by another editor, a member of the WikiProject Military History:

The most active WikiProject of which I am a member is WikiProject Military History, and I've been a member of it since the year I joined Wikipedia. I currently serve as a "coordinator" for the project, which is an informal leadership position decided annually by vote. Most intra-project collaboration involves sharing general advice with one another, or offering minor suggestions such as what template might best fit an article. Since "military history" is such a broad subject area, members will specialize, so sometimes if I an [sic] encounter (for example) a US Civil War subject that I think needs improvement, I'll point it out to one of our members who is really knowledgeable in that area and ask for their help or advice. People will come to me for questions on Cold War African military history. As a project coordinator, I do have some additional responsibilities such as conducting formal reviews of other editors' content for internal quality ratings (any editor can do this, but the coordinators are expected to help more in this respect).

In many comments, WikiProjects appear as communities of people who share common interests, review, rate, and classify articles relevant to the project, discuss problems with other members, ask for advice and suggestions. Of course, those activities can result in collaborative editing, but this does not characterize the engagement of most Wikipedians with the WikiProjects.

Even though WikiProjects do not appear in the main to be collaborative spaces, it should be noted that most Wikipedians generally argue that their editing activities are not solitary but collaborative. According to Table 8, 39 users reported that their engagement with the production of history on Wikipedia is the result of collaboration. 24 users found their involvement solitary, and 13 users argued that their engagement can be both collaborative and solitary depending on the circumstances. Most participants explained that they often collaborate with other Wikipedians when they edit an entry on Wikipedia, but that this collaboration tends to take place within the articles themselves or in the related "talk pages," not typically in the communities of the relevant WikiProjects. This does



not necessarily mean, of the 39 users who deemed their work on Wikipedia to be collaborative, that many editors do not often collaborate with other members of WikiProjects. Instead, it shows that many Wikipedians work together within the general framework of the article they are trying to improve. As one Wikipedia editor described: “Most of my direct and most intensive collaboration has been done outside the project, however, and this usually happens by chance, when I stumble across another editor who happens to be interested in improving the same article I’m working on”. This approach is evident in many comments, as can be seen from the following responses: “My collaboration generally involves a few other editors on specific articles or topics,” “We use the talk page and notify other editors for discussions, and participation can be anything from minor edits to creating new pages,” etc.

The main point here is that the process of historical knowledge production on Wikipedia is collaborative for most editors, but as the responses of Wikipedians reveal, it is not only limited to the communities of the related WikiProjects that Wikipedia has established. Instead, editors work on their own, choosing articles based on their historical interests and their intimate connections to the past. They collaborate with other Wikipedians while they work on the same article and often use the WikiProjects to find resources about their historical inquiries, to ask for suggestions, or to share their worries.

Four characteristics appear in Wikipedia editors’ comments and define their involvement with history. First, for most Wikipedians, writing about history on Wikipedia signifies a fun, enjoyable, and pleasurable activity. They contribute to the production of history because they enjoy the practices of reading, writing, doing research, and learning about the past. They pursue their historical interests and become experts in historical areas and topics. At the same time, many Wikipedians engage with the production of history because they want to provide a more complete, less biased, and accurate historical narrative to the public. They take advantage of Wikipedia’s digital and public character to store their histories and disseminate them to the public. Therefore, they educate visitors to Wikipedia and prevent the past from getting lost or being forgotten. Second, Wikipedia editors decide to create or edit a historical page on a topic which they are interested in and passionate about in order to explore it further. Their preexisting knowledge about a subject does not define their editing choices; instead, it is their curiosity, their personal interest, and their willingness to examine the topic more deeply.

Third, Wikipedians turn to the past because it has a significant presence in their lives. The presence of the past can take multiple forms: a direct experience from the past, a family memory related to the past, their identities, personal beliefs, the places where they have lived or have visited, the history of their families and their ancestors. All these dynamic relations to the past make it clear that

most Wikipedians have a personal connection to the topics that they want to explore further and to make part of Wikipedia. However, they hesitate to make that clear in their responses about why they engage with history on Wikipedia and what their criteria is when deciding to edit a page. Fourth, writing about history on Wikipedia is mainly a collaborative practice, but that collaboration does not only take place within the existing WikiProjects, it also happens on the articles they edit and their related discussion pages.

**Table 7:** Do you edit articles as a part of the WikiProject or do you edit independently?

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1. Editing alone – 40 users
  2. In a WikiProject – 25 users
  3. Both – 18 users
- 

**Table 8:** Is editing on Wikipedia the result of collaboration or solitary work?

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1. Collaborative – 39 users
  1. Solitary – 24 users
  3. Both – 13 users
-

# Conclusion

In 2021, the American Historical Association published a study on how the American public perceives and understands the past.<sup>1</sup> The study was based on a national survey of 1,816 people and signified the most current overview of the public's view on history since the important work of Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, published in 1998.<sup>2</sup> According to AHA's study, 46 percent of respondents turn to Wikipedia to learn about history and acquire a historical understanding of the past. Wikipedia was ranked higher than other historical activities, such as "Historic site visit," "Museum visit," "Genealogy work," "Social media," "Podcast/radio program," "History lecture," and "History-related video game". Almost half of the respondents confirmed that they use Wikipedia as a source of historical knowledge. These findings combined with the appropriation of Wikipedia's corpus by ChatGPT and Wikipedia's partnership with the most central search engine in the digital world, Google, and other digital assistants, such as Siri and Alexa, make it clear how crucial Wikipedia's role is in how the public learns about history and makes sense of the past.<sup>3</sup>

Wikipedia is not only significant because people constantly visit its contents and consume historical knowledge but also because it allows the public to get actively involved in the production of its contents. In the digital world, many projects have tried to use the model of Wikipedia and apply it for other purposes.<sup>4</sup> Even academic digital history projects, digital heritage and museum projects have been created according to the technologies and the crowdsourcing model of Wikipedia. However, most of them have failed to become self-regulated communities in

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1 Pete Burkholder and Dana Schaffer, "A Snapshot of the Public's Views on History," *Perspectives on History*, August 30, 2021, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/a-snapshot-of-the-publics-views-on-history-national-poll-offers-valuable-insights-for-historians-and-advocates/>

2 Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

3 Jon Gertner, "Wikipedia's Moment of Truth," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2023, accessed August 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/18/magazine/wikipedia-ai-chatgpt.html>. For more information on Wikipedia's collaboration with Google, Siri, and Alexa, see Ford, "Rise of the Underdog".

4 For example, some attempts by Wikimedia Foundation to use the Wikipedia model for other projects have failed. See Adrienne LaFrance, "The Problem With WikiTribune," *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2017, accessed August 25, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/wikipedia-the-newspaper/524211/>; Gian Volpicelli, "Wikipedia's Jimmy Wales wanted to save journalism. He didn't," *Wired*, April 16, 2019, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/jimmy-wales-is-having-another-crack-at-wikitribune>

the way that Wikipedia has.<sup>5</sup> Only Wikipedia has managed to become a successful platform based on the crowdsourcing model, without advertisements, and been able to keep its contents free. As of January 2024, Wikipedia includes 55 million articles in 309 languages and, according to the web traffic analysis company, Similarweb, Wikipedia was the 7th most visited website worldwide in December 2023.<sup>6</sup> This dimension of Wikipedia illustrates the significance of the public within the Wikipedia community. Wikipedia editors are the agents who have managed to make Wikipedia a self-regulated community and a public source of historical knowledge, which is dominant in the digital world and determines people's encounters with history to an important extent.

This book examined those two dimensions of Wikipedia. On the one hand, it shed light on Wikipedia's setup, its guidelines, methods, policies, and power structures that shape historical knowledge production. On the other hand, this study placed Wikipedia editors at the center of historical inquiry and investigated how they view history and why they contribute to the production of historical knowledge. By following multiple methodologies and using different kinds of data, such as Wikipedians' comments, personal data, and survey responses, this project focused on the dynamic role of Wikipedia editors and examined their involvement in the creation and editing of Wikipedia articles related to history. This work presents Wikipedia as a digital and public space that allows users to engage with the past actively and creatively by discussing it on the related "talk pages". This does not mean that all discussions result in editing changes in the main entry, as the transformation of discussions to historical knowledge goes through a process of control and bureaucracy that Wikipedia has established. In this process, some more experienced editors have a more powerful position than others. In other words, the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia resembles a filter into which editors pour their memories, experiences, emotions, personal stories, and academic scholarship. All these then flow through the "sociotechnical" system of Wikipedia and result in the creation or editing of a Wikipedia article.

Specifically, in Chapter 1, I explored how Wikipedia has managed to become a self-regulated community and a public space where people can discuss, create, and edit historical articles. The digital structure of Wikipedia, including its policies, guidelines, hierarchy, and sub-communities, encourages dynamic participation on Wikipedia and active engagement with the production of historical knowledge. At

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5 For a specific crowdsourcing project and its failure, see Graham, Massie, and Feuerherm, "The HeritageCrowd Project: A Case Study in Crowdsourcing Public History," 228.

6 "Wikipedia:Size comparisons," *Wikipedia*, accessed January 9, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Size\\_comparisons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Size_comparisons); "Top Websites Ranking," *Similarweb*, accessed January 9, 2024, <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/>

the same time, Wikipedia creates a multilayered system of bureaucracy and surveillance that does not allow all users to have the same power within the Wikipedia community and, thus, determine the production of historical knowledge in the same way.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I studied four different case studies that relate to traumatic events of modern United States history – the Great Depression, the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Vietnam War, and the September 11 attacks – in order to examine the agency of Wikipedia users and their engagement with the production of history. I showed that the production of historical knowledge on Wikipedia is a complex process, in which Wikipedia editors do not just write about history but actively engage with the past by agreeing and disagreeing about history, reading books and articles, sharing their personal memories, giving justice to the past, and preventing the past from falling into obscurity. Wikipedians do not only base what they write about history on their memories or on the passive consumption of other popular forms of history, but also based on a combination of personal experiences, academic scholarship, and Wikipedia guidelines. However, the four case studies revealed differences in Wikipedians' engagement with history. In the first two case studies, which belong to the distant past, lived experience played a lesser role and interpretation of scholarship played a stronger role. In the other two case studies, which belong to the recent past, editors relied more on their direct experiences of the past and tried to make these experiences part of the broader historical narrative.

In Chapter 4, I applied a quantitative approach to Wikipedians' involvement with the production of historical knowledge and examined the Wikipedia community as a network, in which editors are the nodes and the connections between editors, who contribute to the creation and development of Wikipedia pages, are the edges. By measuring those connections, I revealed the structures of power and hierarchy that shape the production of history on Wikipedia. I also discerned the interests of Wikipedia editors, who edit articles related to history, and their respective identities as they are promoted within the Wikipedia community. I argued that a few experienced editors and veterans, as well as some non-human agents and bots, are for the most part responsible for the creation of Wikipedia articles. These two kinds of editors control the production of historical knowledge to a large extent.

In Chapter 5, I conducted an online survey with Wikipedia editors who create and edit articles related to history. By placing the voices of Wikipedians at the center of my research, I presented an overview of Wikipedia users' engagement with history, their editing experiences, the reasons why they edit, their historical interests, their criteria to edit or create a historical page, their personal relation with the historical topics they choose to edit, their educational background, their

collaboration with other editors, and their activity within the – history related – WikiProjects.

Apart from the main results of the study, this book tried to contribute to the historiography of public and digital history by investigating one of the most central public and digital sources of historical knowledge that has generally been neglected by historians. A better understanding of how history is constructed on Wikipedia, and why Wikipedia constitutes a successful crowdsourcing project that attracts the public and produces historical narratives, can help both academic historians and practitioners in museums, archives, and cultural heritage institutions to design more successful digital history and public history projects.

At the same time, this book investigated the public as an active producer of history rather than as a passive consumer.<sup>7</sup> It did not view the public as a single entity; instead, it highlighted the multiple publics of Wikipedia, their interests, their education, their different roles in the production of historical knowledge, and their various relations to the past.<sup>8</sup> By exploring Wikipedians' stories and experiences from their involvement in Wikipedia, this study tried to follow David Dean's suggestion for a public history that will not only be for and about the public but also by and with the public.<sup>9</sup> As the librarian Phoebe Ayers has wonderfully put it: "When I look at a Wikipedia article, I see the people behind it – the generous, quirky, enthusiastic souls that write and curate Wikipedia".<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia users produce historical knowledge online by engaging with the past, sharing their personal stories, opinions, memories, and emotions about history, getting involved in debates and discussions, collaborating with other Wikipedians, and by complying with the established hierarchies, guidelines and policies of Wikipedia.

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7 For a more detailed analysis of how the public has appeared in the historiography of public history, see Apostolopoulos, "What is the Public of Public History? Between the Public Sphere and Public Agency," and Joanna Wojdon and Dorota Wiśniewka, ed., *Public in Public History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022).

8 On the use of "publics" instead of "public," see Dean, "Introduction," in *A Companion to Public History*, 3–4.

9 David Dean, "Publics, Public Historians, and Participatory Public History," in *Public in Public History*, ed. Joanna Wojdon and Dorota Wiśniewka (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), 2–3.

10 Ayers, "Wikipedia and Libraries".

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