

Criticism of Wikipedia

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

For a list of criticisms of Wikipedia, see Wikipedia:Criticisms. See also Wikipedia:Replies to common objections.

Criticism of Wikipedia—whether on its content, its community, or its procedures and operations—covers a wide variety of topics, largely related to its openness. The project's aims have been criticized, mostly due to its will to include controversial content. Major concerns about Wikipedia's content include its reliability, quality of presentation and systemic bias. The Wikipedia community and its organization are criticized for the anonymity of editors, and social stratification, all of which may give rise to abuse. Wikipedia's processes have also been criticized for making vandalism too easy. Its rules have been judged excessive.

Edwin Black criticizes Wikipedia for being a mixture of "truth, half truth, and some falsehoods".^[1] Articles in The Chronicle of Higher Education and The Journal of Academic Librarianship have criticized Wikipedia's policy on undue weight, concluding that the fact that Wikipedia explicitly is not designed to provide correct information about a subject,^[2] but rather present dominantly the majority viewpoint taken by sources, may create possible omissions leading to false beliefs based on incomplete information.^{[3][4][5]}

Journalist Oliver Kamm noted how articles are dominated by the loudest and most persistent voices, usually by a group with an "ax to grind" on the topic.^[6] An article in Education Next Journal concluded that as a resource about controversial topics, Wikipedia is notoriously subject to manipulation and spin.^[7]

Wikipedia steward Dariusz Jemielniak asserts that the sheer complexity of the rules and laws governing content and editor behavior have become excessive and create a learning burden for new editors.^{[8][9]} Jemielniak suggests actively abridging and rewriting the rules and laws to fall within a fixed and reasonable limit of size and complexity to remedy their excessive complexity and size.^{[8][9]} A study by Aaron Halfaker of the University of Minnesota made in 2013 argued that Wikipedia's rules have had the unintended effect of driving away new contributors to the site.^[10]

The *Academic Integrity at MIT* handbook for students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology states: "Wikipedia is Not a Reliable Academic Source: The bibliography published at the end of the Wikipedia entry may point you to potential sources. However, do not assume that these sources are reliable – use the same criteria to judge them as you would any other source. Do not consider the Wikipedia bibliography as a replacement for your own research."^[11]

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Criticism of content

Accuracy of information

For more details on this topic, see [Reliability of Wikipedia § Assessments](#).

Lack of authority

Wikipedia acknowledges that it should not be used as a primary source for research.^[13] Librarian Philip Bradley stated in an October 2004 interview with *The Guardian* that "the main problem is the lack of authority. With printed publications, the publishers have to ensure that their data are reliable, as their livelihood depends on it. But with something like this, all that goes out the window."^[14] Robert McHenry similarly noted that readers of Wikipedia cannot know who has written the article they are reading – it may or may not have been written by an expert.^[15]

Comparative study on scientific articles conducted by *Nature*

In December 2005 the journal *Nature* conducted a single-blind study comparing the accuracy of a sample of articles from Wikipedia and Encyclopædia Britannica. The sample included 42 articles on scientific topics, including biographies of well-known scientists. The articles were compared for accuracy by academic reviewers who remained anonymous – a customary practice for journal article reviews. Based on their review, the average Wikipedia article contained 4 errors or omissions; the average *Britannica* article, 3. The study concluded:

"Wikipedia comes close to Britannica in terms of the accuracy of its science entries".^[16] The *Nature* reviewers' main criticism of the Wikipedia entries was that they were often confused, lacking a clear structure, and unduly focused on controversial theories.^[17]

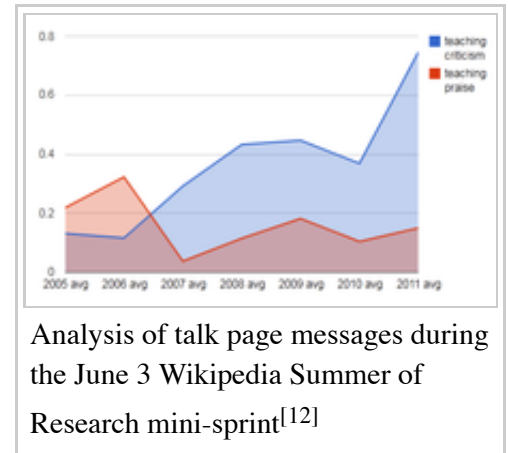
Concerns about the study's findings expressed by *Encyclopædia Britannica*'s led to *Nature* releasing further documentation of its survey method.^[18] Based on this additional information, *Encyclopædia Britannica* denied the validity of the *Nature* study, stating that it was "fatally flawed" as the *Britannica* extracts were compilations that sometimes included articles written for the youth version.^[19] *Nature* acknowledged the compiled nature of some of the *Britannica* extracts, but denied that this invalidated the conclusions of the study.^[20] *Encyclopædia Britannica* also argued that while the *Nature* study showed that the error rate between the two encyclopaediae was similar, a breakdown of the errors indicated that the mistakes in Wikipedia were more often the inclusion of incorrect facts, while the mistakes in *Britannica* were "errors of omission", making "*Britannica* far more accurate than *Wikipedia*, according to the figures".^[19]

Nature subsequently rejected the *Britannica* response and published a point-by-point response to *Britannica*'s specific objections about alleged errors.^{[21][22]}

Lack of methodical fact-checking

Inaccurate information that is not obviously false may persist in Wikipedia for a long time before it is challenged. The most prominent cases reported by mainstream media involved biographies of living people.

The Wikipedia Seigenthaler biography incident demonstrated that the subject of a biographical article must sometimes fix blatant lies about his own life. In May 2005, an anonymous user edited the biographical article on American journalist and writer John Seigenthaler so that it contained several false and defamatory



statements.^{[23][24]} The inaccurate claims went unnoticed from May until September 2005 when they were discovered by Victor S. Johnson, Jr., a friend of Seigenthaler. Wikipedia content is often mirrored at sites such as Answers.com, which means that incorrect information can be replicated alongside correct information through a number of web sources. Such information can develop a misleading authority because of its presence at such sites.^[25]



American journalist John Seigenthaler, object of the Seigenthaler incident

In another example, on March 2, 2007, msnbc.com reported that then-New York Senator and former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton had been incorrectly listed for 20 months in her Wikipedia biography as valedictorian of her class of 1969 at Wellesley College (which she was not, though she did speak at commencement).^[26] The article included a link to the Wikipedia edit,^[27] where the incorrect information was added on July 9, 2005. The inaccurate information was removed within 24 hours after the msnbc.com report appeared.^[28]

Attempts to perpetrate hoaxes may not be confined to editing existing Wikipedia articles, but can also include creating new articles. In October 2005, Alan Mcilwraith, a former call center worker from Scotland, created a Wikipedia article in which he claimed to be a highly decorated war hero. However, the article was quickly identified as a hoax by other users and deleted.^{[29][30]}

There have also been instances of users deliberately inserting false information into Wikipedia in order to test the system and demonstrate its alleged unreliability. Gene Weingarten, a journalist, ran such a test in 2007. He inserted false information into his own Wikipedia article, and it was removed 27 hours later by a Wikipedia editor.^[31] Wikipedia considers the deliberate insertion of false and misleading information to be vandalism.^[32]

Neutral point of view and conflicts of interest

Wikipedia regards the concept of a neutral point of view (NPOV) as one of its non-negotiable principles; however, it acknowledges that such a concept has its limitations – its policy indeed states that articles should be "as far as possible" written without bias.^[33] Mark Glaser, a journalist, also wrote that this may be an impossible ideal due to the inevitable biases of editors.^[34]

In August 2007, a tool called WikiScanner developed by Virgil Griffith, a visiting researcher from the Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico, was released to match anonymous IP edits in the encyclopedia with an extensive database of addresses.^[35] News stories appeared about IP addresses from various organizations such as the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Republican Congressional Committee, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Diebold, Inc. and the Australian government being used to make edits to Wikipedia articles, sometimes of an opinionated or questionable nature. Another story stated that an IP address from the BBC itself had been used to vandalize the article on George W. Bush.^[36] The BBC quoted a Wikipedia spokesperson as praising the tool: "We really value transparency and the scanner really takes this to another

level. Wikipedia Scanner may prevent an organisation or individuals from editing articles that they're really not supposed to."^[37] Not everyone hailed WikiScanner as a success for Wikipedia. Oliver Kamm, in a column for *The Times*, argued instead that:^[6]

The WikiScanner is thus an important development in bringing down a pernicious influence on our intellectual life. Critics of the web decry the medium as the cult of the amateur. Wikipedia is worse than that; it is the province of the covert lobby. The most constructive course is to stand on the sidelines and jeer at its pretensions.

WikiScanner only reveals conflicts of interest when the editor does not have a Wikipedia account and their IP address is used instead. Conflict of interest editing done by editors with accounts is not detected, since those edits are anonymous to everyone except certain Wikipedia admins.^[38]

Scientific disputes

The 2005 *Nature* study also gave two brief examples of challenges that Wikipedian science writers purportedly faced on Wikipedia. The first concerned the addition of a section on violence to the schizophrenia article, which exhibited the view of one of the article's regular editors, neuropsychologist Vaughan Bell, that it was little more than a "rant" about the need to lock people up, and that editing it stimulated him to look up the literature on the topic.^[16]

Another dispute involved the climate researcher William Connolley, who was opposed by other editors. The topic in this second dispute was the greenhouse effect; *The New Yorker* reported that this dispute was far more protracted, and led to arbitration, which took three months to produce a decision. The outcome of arbitration, as reported by *Nature*, was a six-month parole for Connolley – during this time he was restricted to one revert per day.^[39]

Exposure to political operatives and advocates

While Wikipedia policy requires articles to have a neutral point of view, it is not immune from attempts by outsiders (or insiders) with an agenda to place a spin on articles. In January 2006 it was revealed that several staffers of members of the U.S. House of Representatives had embarked on a campaign to cleanse their respective bosses' biographies on Wikipedia, as well as inserting negative remarks on political opponents. References to a campaign promise by Martin Meehan to surrender his seat in 2000 were deleted, and negative comments were inserted into the articles on U.S. Senator Bill Frist and Eric Cantor, a congressman from Virginia. Numerous other changes were made from an IP address which is assigned to the House of Representatives.^[40] In an interview, Wikipedia *de facto* leader Jimmy Wales remarked that the changes were "not cool".^[41]

In 2008, the pro-Israel group Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA) organized an e-mail campaign to encourage readers to correct perceived Israel-related biases and inconsistencies in Wikipedia.^[45] CAMERA argued the excerpts were unrepresentative and that it had explicitly campaigned merely "toward encouraging people to learn about and edit the online encyclopedia for accuracy".^[46] Defenders of CAMERA and the competing group, Electronic Intifada, went into mediation.^[45] Israeli diplomat David Saranga said that Wikipedia is generally fair in regard to Israel. When it was pointed out that the entry on Israel mentioned the word "occupation" nine times, whereas the entry on the Palestinian People mentioned "terror" only once, he responded, "It means only one thing: Israelis should be more active on Wikipedia. Instead of blaming it, they should go on the site much more, and try and change it."^[47]

Political commentator Haviv Rettig Gur, reviewing widespread perceptions in Israel of systemic bias in Wikipedia articles, has argued that there are deeper structural problems creating this bias: anonymous editing favors biased results, especially if the editors organize concerted campaigns of defamation as has been done in articles dealing with Arab-Israeli issues, and current Wikipedia policies, while well-meant, have proven ineffective in handling this.^[48]

On August 31, 2008, *The New York Times* ran an article detailing the edits made to the biography of Alaska governor Sarah Palin in the wake of her nomination as running mate of Arizona Senator John McCain. During the 24 hours before the McCain campaign announcement, 30 edits (http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sarah_Palin&diff=234778085&oldid=234741793), many of them flattering details, were made to the article by Wikipedia single-purpose user identity Young Trigg.^[49] This person has later acknowledged working on the McCain campaign, and having several Wikipedia user accounts.^[50]

In November 2007, libelous accusations were made against two politicians from southwestern France, Jean-Pierre Grand and H  l  ne Mandroux-Colas, on their Wikipedia biographies. Jean-Pierre Grand asked the president of the French National Assembly and the Prime Minister of France to reinforce the legislation on the penal responsibility of Internet sites and of authors who peddle false informations in order to cause harm.^[51] Senator Jean Louis Masson then requested the Minister of Justice to tell him whether it would be possible to increase the criminal responsibilities of hosting providers, site operators, and authors of libelous content; the minister declined to do so, recalling the existing rules in the LCEN law.^[52]

On August 25, 2010, the Toronto Star reported that the Canadian "government is now conducting two investigations into federal employees who have taken to Wikipedia to express their opinion on federal policies and bitter political debates."^[53]

In 2010, Al Jazeera's Teymoor Nabili suggested that the article *Cyrus Cylinder* had been edited for political purposes by "an apparent tussle of opinions in the shadowy world of hard drives and 'independent' editors that comprise the Wikipedia industry." He suggested that after the Iranian presidential election, 2009 and the ensuing "anti-Iranian activities" a "strenuous attempt to portray the cylinder as nothing more than the propaganda tool of an aggressive invader" was visible. The edits following his analysis of the edits during 2009 and 2010, represented "a complete dismissal of the suggestion that the cylinder, or Cyrus' actions, represent concern for human rights or any kind of enlightened intent," in stark contrast to Cyrus' own reputation as documented in the Old Testament and the people of Babylon.^[54]

Commandeering or sanitizing articles

Articles of particular interest to an editor or group of editors are sometimes commandeered^[55] and sanitized. Organizations like Sony, Diebold, Nintendo, Dell, the CIA and the Church of Scientology were all shown to have sanitized pages about themselves^{[56][57]} to continually reflect a point of view that sheds a favorable light on the subject or group. Editors essentially "squat" on pages, watching for negative entries, then immediately revert them. This is especially true of pages on politicians as shown on USA Congressional staff edits to Wikipedia. There are also accusations of editors sanitizing pages to remove any negative information about persons or organizations. The page on Scientology has also been subject to being commandeered and has been put under the Wikipedia:Protection policy. These habits of commandeering, sanitizing and squatting discourage informed experts from spending the time and attention to make quality entries for fear that accurate and time-consuming work will be quickly deleted.^[58]

Editing for financial rewards

In January 2007 Rick Jelliffe stated in a story carried by CBS^[59] and IDG News Service^{[60][61]} that Microsoft had offered him compensation in exchange for his future editorial services on Wikipedia's articles related to OOXML (Office Open Extensible Markup Language). A Microsoft spokesperson, quoted by CBS, commented that "Microsoft and the writer, Rick Jelliffe, had not determined a price and no money had changed hands – but they had agreed that the company would not be allowed to review his writing before submission". Also quoted by CBS, Jimmy Wales expressed his disapproval of Microsoft's involvement: "We were very disappointed to hear that Microsoft was taking that approach".

Quality of the presentation

Quality of writing

Roy Rosenzweig, in a June 2006 essay that combined both praise and criticism of Wikipedia, had several criticisms of its prose and its failure to distinguish the genuinely important from the merely sensational. He said that Wikipedia is "surprisingly accurate in reporting names, dates, and events in U.S. history" (Rosenzweig's own field of study) and that most of the few factual errors that he found "were small and inconsequential" and that some of them "simply repeat widely held but inaccurate beliefs", which are also repeated in *Encarta* and the *Britannica*. However, he made one major criticism:

Good historical writing requires not just factual accuracy but also a command of the scholarly literature, persuasive analysis and interpretations, and clear and engaging prose. By those measures, *American National Biography Online* easily outdistances Wikipedia.^[62]

Contrasting Wikipedia's treatment of Abraham Lincoln to that of Civil War historian James McPherson in *American National Biography Online*, he said that both were essentially accurate and covered the major episodes in Lincoln's life, but praised "McPherson's richer contextualization... his artful use of quotations to capture Lincoln's voice ... and ... his ability to convey a profound message in a handful of words." By contrast, he gives an example of Wikipedia's prose that he finds "both verbose and dull". Rosenzweig made a further criticism, contrasting "the skill and confident judgment of a seasoned historian" displayed by McPherson and others to the "antiquarianism" of Wikipedia (which he compares in this respect to *American Heritage* magazine), and said that while Wikipedia often provides extensive references, they are not the best ones.^[62]

Rosenzweig also criticized the "waffling—encouraged by the npov policy—[which] means that it is hard to discern any overall interpretive stance in Wikipedia history." By example, he quoted the conclusion of Wikipedia's article on William Clarke Quantrill. While generally praising the article, he pointed out its "waffling" conclusion: "Some historians... remember him as an opportunistic, bloodthirsty outlaw, while others continue to view him as a daring soldier and local folk hero."^[62]

A study of cancer articles by Yaacov Lawrence of the Kimmel Cancer Center at Thomas Jefferson University found that the entries were mostly accurate, but they were written at college reading level, as opposed to the ninth grade level seen in the Physician Data Query. He said that "Wikipedia's lack of readability may reflect its varied origins and haphazard editing."^[63] *The Economist* noted that the quality of writing of Wikipedia articles can be a guide to the reader: "inelegant or ranting prose usually reflects muddled thoughts and incomplete information."^[64]

***The Wall Street Journal* debate**

In the September 12, 2006, edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, Jimmy Wales debated with Dale Hoiberg, editor-in-chief of *Encyclopædia Britannica*.^[65] Hoiberg focused on a need for expertise and control in an encyclopedia and cited Lewis Mumford that overwhelming information could "bring about a state of intellectual enervation and depletion hardly to be distinguished from massive ignorance."

Wales emphasized Wikipedia's differences, and asserted that openness and transparency lead to quality. Hoiberg said that he "had neither the time nor space to respond to [criticisms]" and "could corral any number of links to articles alleging errors in Wikipedia", to which Wales responded: "No problem! Wikipedia to the rescue with a fine article", and included a link to the Wikipedia article *Criticism of Wikipedia*.^[65]

Systemic bias in coverage

See also: Reliability of Wikipedia § Coverage and Academic studies about Wikipedia § A minority of editors produce the majority of persistent content

Wikipedia has been accused of systemic bias, which is to say its general nature leads, without necessarily any conscious intention, to the propagation of various prejudices. Although many articles in newspapers have concentrated on minor factual errors in Wikipedia articles, there are also concerns about large-scale, presumably unintentional effects from the increasing influence and use of Wikipedia as a research tool at all levels. In an article in the *Times Higher Education* magazine (London) philosopher Martin Cohen frames Wikipedia of having "become a monopoly" with "all the prejudices and ignorance of its creators", which he describes as a "youthful cab-driver's" perspective.^[66] Cohen's argument, however, finds a grave conclusion in these circumstances: "To control the reference sources that people use is to control the way people comprehend the world. Wikipedia may have a benign, even trivial face, but underneath may lie a more sinister and subtle threat to freedom of thought."^[66] That freedom is undermined by what he sees as what matters on Wikipedia, "not your sources but the 'support of the community'".^[66]

Critics also point to the tendency to cover topics in a detail disproportionate to their importance. For example, Stephen Colbert once mockingly praised Wikipedia for having a "longer entry on 'lightsabers' than it does on the 'printing press'".^[67] In an interview with *The Guardian*, Dale Hoiberg, the editor-in-chief of *Encyclopædia Britannica*, noted:^[14]

People write of things they're interested in, and so many subjects don't get covered; and news events get covered in great detail. In the past, the entry on Hurricane Frances was more than five times the length of that on Chinese art, and the entry on *Coronation Street* was twice as long as the article on Tony Blair.

This critical approach has been satirised "Wikigroaning", a term coined by Jon Hendren^[68] of the website Something Awful.^[69] In the game, two articles (preferably with similar names) are compared: one about an acknowledged, serious, or classical subject and the other about a popular or current one.^[70] Defenders of a broad inclusion criteria have held that the encyclopedia's coverage of pop culture does not impose space constraints on the coverage of more serious subjects (see "Wiki is not paper"). As Ivor Tossell noted:

That Wikipedia is chock full of useless arcana (and did you know, by the way, that the article on "Debate" is shorter than the piece that weighs the relative merits of the 1978 and 2003 versions of Battlestar Galactica?) isn't a knock against it: Since it can grow infinitely, the silly articles aren't depriving the serious ones of space.^[71]

In 2014, supporters of holistic healing and energy psychology began a change.org petition asking for "true scientific discourse" on Wikipedia, complaining that "much of the information [on Wikipedia] related to holistic approaches to healing is biased, misleading, out-of-date, or just plain wrong". In response, Jimmy Wales said that Wikipedia only covers works that are published in respectable scientific journals.^{[72][73]}

Notability of article topics

This section is duplicated at Reliability of Wikipedia#Notability of article topics.

Wikipedia's notability guidelines, and the application thereof, are the subject of much criticism.^[74] Nicholson Baker considers the notability standards arbitrary and essentially unsolvable.^[75]

There are quires, reams, bales of controversy over what constitutes notability in Wikipedia: nobody will ever sort it out.

Criticizing the "deletionists", Baker then writes:^[74]

Still, a lot of good work—verifiable, informative, brain-leapingly strange—is being cast out of this paperless, infinitely expandable accordion folder by people who have a narrow, almost grade-schoolish notion of what sort of curiosity an on-line encyclopedia will be able to satisfy in the years to come. [...] It's harder to improve something that's already written, or to write something altogether new, especially now that so many of the World Book–sanctioned encyclopedic fruits are long plucked. There are some people on Wikipedia now who are just bullies, who take pleasure in wrecking and mocking peoples' work—even to the point of laughing at nonstandard "Engrish". They poke articles full of warnings and citation-needed notes and deletion prods till the topics go away.

Yet another criticism^[76] about the deletionists is this: "The increasing difficulty of making a successful edit; the exclusion of casual users; slower growth – all are hallmarks of the deletionists approach."

Complaining that his own biography was on the verge of deletion for lack of notability, Timothy Noah argued that:^[77]

Wikipedia's notability policy resembles U.S. immigration policy before 9/11: stringent rules, spotty enforcement. To be notable, a Wikipedia topic must be "the subject of multiple, non-trivial published works from sources that are reliable and independent of the subject and of each other." Although I have written or been quoted in such works, I can't say I've ever been the subject of any. And wouldn't you know, some notability cop cruised past my bio and pulled me over. Unless I get notable in a hurry—win the Nobel Peace Prize? Prove I sired Anna Nicole Smith's baby daughter?—a "sysop" (volunteer techie) will wipe my Wikipedia page clean. It's straight out of Philip K. Dick.

In the same article, Noah mentions that the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Stacy Schiff was not considered notable enough for a Wikipedia entry before she wrote an extensive *New Yorker* article on Wikipedia itself.

Partisanship

There have been suggestions that a politically liberal viewpoint is predominant. According to Jimmy Wales: "The Wikipedia community is very diverse, from liberal to conservative to libertarian and beyond. If averages mattered, and due to the nature of the wiki software (no voting) they almost certainly don't, I would say that the Wikipedia community is slightly more liberal than the U.S. population on average, because we are global and the international community of English speakers is slightly more liberal than the U.S. population. There are no data or surveys to back that."^[78] Andrew Schlafly created Conservapedia because of his perception that Wikipedia contained a liberal bias.^[79] Conservapedia's editors have compiled a list of alleged examples of liberal bias in Wikipedia.^[80] In 2007, an article in *The Christian Post* criticised Wikipedia's coverage of intelligent design, saying that it was biased and hypocritical.^[81] Lawrence Solomon of the *National Review* considered the Wikipedia articles on subjects like global warming, intelligent design, and *Roe v. Wade* all to be slanted in favor of liberal views.^[82]

In a September 2010 issue of the conservative weekly *Human Events*, Rowan Scarborough presented a critique of Wikipedia's coverage of American politicians prominent in the approaching midterm elections as evidence of systemic liberal bias.^[83] Scarborough compares the biographical articles of liberal and conservative opponents in Senate races in the Alaska Republican primary and the Delaware and Nevada general election, emphasizing the quantity of negative coverage of tea party-endorsed candidates. He also cites some criticism by Lawrence Solomon and quotes in full the lead section of Wikipedia's article on its rival Conservapedia as evidence of an underlying bias.

In 2012, a professor at Northwestern University and another professor at the University of Southern California analyzed Wikipedia articles on U.S. politics, going back a decade, and wrote a study that showed that articles with a large number of contributors lead to more unbiased articles, but that the majority of articles still retain a Democrat lean from Wikipedia's early years.^[84]

American and corporate bias

In 2008, Tim Anderson, a senior lecturer in political economy at the University of Sydney, said that Wikipedia administrators display a U.S.-oriented bias in their interaction with editors, and in their determination of sources that are appropriate for use on the site. Anderson was outraged after several of the sources he used in his edits to Hugo Chávez, including *Venezuela Analysis* and *Z Magazine*, were disallowed as "unusable". Anderson also described Wikipedia's Neutral point of view policy to ZDNet Australia as "a facade", and that Wikipedia "hides behind a reliance on corporate media editorials".^[85]

Racial bias

Main article: Racial bias on Wikipedia

Gender bias

Main article: Gender bias on Wikipedia

Editor diversity

Wikipedia has a longstanding controversy concerning gender bias and sexism.^{[86][87][88][89][90][91]} Wikipedia has been criticized^[86] by some journalists and academics for lacking not only women contributors but also extensive and in-depth encyclopedic attention to many topics regarding gender. An article in *The New York Times* cites a Wikimedia Foundation study which found that fewer than 13 percent of contributors to Wikipedia are women. Sue Gardner, the executive director of the foundation, said that increasing diversity was about making the encyclopedia "as good as it could be". Factors the article cited as possibly discouraging women from editing included the "obsessive fact-loving realm", associations with the "hard-driving hacker crowd", and the necessity to be "open to very difficult, high-conflict people, even misogynists."^[87]

Allegations of biased treatment

The English Wikipedia Arbitration Committee has been criticized as unfairly targeting female and feminist editors.

In an article for *Slate*, David Auerbach criticized the decisions made by the Arbitration Committee, on a December 2014 case centered around the site's Gender Gap Task Force. Auerbach opposed the Arbitration Committee's decision to permanently ban a female editor involved in the case, while not banning her male "chief antagonists", stating "With the Arbitration Committee opting only to ban the one woman in the dispute despite her behavior being no worse than that of the men, it's hard not to see this as a setback to Wikipedia's efforts to rectify its massive gender gap."^[92]

In January 2015, *The Guardian* reported that the Arbitration Committee had banned five feminist editors from gender-related articles on a case related to the Gamergate controversy, while including quotes from a Wikipedia editor alleging unfair treatment.^{[93][94]} Other commentators, including from *Gawker* and *ThinkProgress*, provided additional analysis while sourcing from *The Guardian*'s story.^{[94][95][96][97][98]} Reports in the *Washington Post*, *Slate* and *Social Text* described these articles as "flawed" or factually inaccurate, pointing out that the Arbitration case had not concluded as at the time of publishing; no editor had been banned.^{[94][99][100]} After the result was published, *Gawker* wrote that 'ArbCom ruled to punish six editors who could be broadly classified as "anti-Gamergate" and five who are "pro-Gamergate".' All of the supposed "Five Horsemen" were among the editors punished, with one of them being the sole editor banned due to this case.^[101] An article called "ArbitrationGate" regarding this situation was created (and quickly deleted) on Wikipedia, while The Guardian later issued a correction to their article.^[94] The Committee and the Wikipedia Foundation issued press statements that the Gamergate case was in response to the atmosphere of the Gamergate article resembling a "battlefield" due to "various sides of the discussion violated community policies and guidelines on conduct", and that the Committee was fulfilling its role to "uphold a civil, constructive atmosphere" on Wikipedia. The Committee also wrote that it "does not rule on the content of articles, or make judgements on the personal views of parties to the case".^{[99][102]} Michael Mandiberg, writing in *Social Text*, remained unconvinced.^[100]

Sexual content

See also: Wikipedia § Explicit content

Wikipedia has been criticized for allowing graphic sexual content such as images and videos of masturbation and ejaculation as well as photos from hardcore pornographic films found on its articles. Child protection campaigners say graphic sexual content appears on many Wikipedia entries, displayed without any warning or age verification.^[103]

The Wikipedia article *Virgin Killer* – a 1976 album from German heavy metal band Scorpions – features a picture of the album's original cover, which depicts a naked prepubescent girl. In December 2008, the Internet Watch Foundation, a nonprofit, nongovernment-affiliated organization, added the article to its blacklist, criticizing the inclusion of the picture as "distasteful". As a result, access to the article was blocked for four days by most Internet service providers in the United Kingdom.^[104]

In April 2010, Larry Sanger, a co-founder of Wikipedia who had left the organization eight years previously, wrote a letter to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, outlining his concerns that two categories of images on Wikimedia Commons contained child pornography, and were in violation of U.S. federal obscenity law. Sanger also expressed concerns about access to the images on Wikipedia in schools.^[105] Sanger later said that it was probably not correct to call it "child pornography", which most people associate with images of real children, and that he should have said "depictions of child sexual abuse".^[106] Wikimedia Foundation spokesman Jay Walsh said that Wikipedia doesn't have "material we would deem to be illegal. If we did, we would remove it."^[105] Following the complaint by Larry Sanger, Jimmy Wales deleted many sexual images without consulting the community; some were reinstated following discussion.^[107] Critics, including Wikipediocracy, noticed that many of the sexual images deleted from Wikipedia since 2010 have reappeared.^[108]

Exposure to vandals

Main article: Vandalism on Wikipedia

Wikipedia has a range of tools available to users and administrators in order to fight against vandalism. Supporters of the project argue that the vast majority of vandalism on Wikipedia is reverted within a short time, and a study by Fernanda Viégas of the MIT Media Lab and Martin Wattenberg and Kushal Dave of IBM Research found that most vandal edits were reverted within around five minutes; however they state that "it is essentially impossible to find a crisp definition of vandalism".^[109] While most instances of page blanking or the addition of offensive material are soon reverted, less obvious vandalism has remained for longer periods.

A 2007 peer-reviewed study^[110] that measured the actual number of page views with "damaged" content, concluded:



Vandalism of a Wikipedia article (Sponge)

42% of damage is repaired almost immediately, i.e., before it can confuse, offend, or mislead anyone. Nonetheless, there are still hundreds of millions of damaged views.

Privacy concerns

Most privacy concerns refer to cases of government or employer data gathering; or to computer or electronic monitoring; or to trading data between organizations. "The Internet has created conflicts between personal privacy, commercial interests and the interests of society at large" warn James Donnelly and Jenifer Haeckl.^[111] Balancing the rights of all concerned as technology alters the social landscape will not be easy. It "is not yet possible to anticipate the path of the common law or governmental regulation" regarding this problem.^[111]

The concern in the case of Wikipedia is the right of a private citizen to remain private; to remain a "private citizen" rather than a "public figure" in the eyes of the law.^[112] It is somewhat of a battle between the right to be anonymous in cyberspace and the right to be anonymous in real life ("meatspace"). Wikipedia Watch argues that "Wikipedia is a potential menace to anyone who values privacy" and that "a greater degree of accountability in the Wikipedia structure" would be "the very first step toward resolving the privacy problem."^[113] A particular problem occurs in the case of an individual who is relatively unimportant and for whom there exists a Wikipedia page against their wishes.

In 2005 Agence France-Presse quoted Daniel Brandt, the Wikipedia Watch owner, as saying that "the basic problem is that no one, neither the trustees of Wikimedia Foundation, nor the volunteers who are connected with Wikipedia, consider themselves responsible for the content."^[114]

In January 2006, a German court ordered the German Wikipedia shut down within Germany because it stated the full name of Boris Floricic, aka "Tron", a deceased hacker who was formerly with the Chaos Computer Club. More specifically, the court ordered that the URL within the German .de domain (<http://www.wikipedia.de/>) may no longer redirect to the encyclopedia's servers in Florida at <http://de.wikipedia.org> although German readers were still able to use the US-based URL directly, and there was virtually no loss of access on their part. The court order arose out of a lawsuit filed by Floricic's parents, demanding that their son's surname be removed from Wikipedia.^[115] On February 9, 2006, the injunction against Wikimedia Deutschland was overturned, with the court rejecting the notion that Tron's right to privacy or that of his parents were being violated.^[116]

Criticism of the community

Jimmy Wales' role

The community of Wikipedia editors has been criticized for placing an irrational emphasis on Jimmy Wales as a person. Wales' role in personally determining the content of some articles has also been criticized as contrary to the independent spirit that Wikipedia supposedly has gained.^[117] ^[118] In early 2007, Wales dismissed the

criticism of the Wikipedia model: "I am unaware of any problems with the quality of discourse on the site. I don't know of any higher-quality discourse anywhere."^{[119][120][121][122][123]}

Conflict of interest cases

Main article: Conflict-of-interest editing on Wikipedia

According to Business Insider, "In September of 2012, there was quite a bit of media attention surrounding two Wikipedia employees who were running a PR business on the side and editing Wikipedia on behalf of their clients."^[124]

Lack of verifiable identities

Scandals involving administrators and arbitrators

Further information: Wikipedia:Requests for de-adminship § Cases

Wikipedian David Boothroyd, a Labour Party member, created controversy in 2009, when Wikipedia Review contributor "Tarantino" discovered that he committed sockpuppeting, editing under the accounts "Dbiv", "Fys" and "Sam Blacketer", none of which acknowledged his real identity. After earning Administrator status with one account, then losing it for inappropriate use of the administrative tools, Boothroyd regained Administrator status with the "Sam Blacketer" sockpuppet account in April 2007.^[125] Later in 2007, Boothroyd's Sam Blacketer account became part of the English Wikipedia's Arbitration Committee.^[126] Under the Sam Blacketer account, Boothroyd edited many articles related to United Kingdom politics, including that of rival Conservative Party leader David Cameron.^{[127][128]} Boothroyd then resigned as an administrator and as an arbitrator.^{[129][130]}

Essjay controversy

Main article: Essjay controversy

In July 2006 *The New Yorker* ran a feature about Wikipedia by Stacy Schiff.^[131] The initial version of the article included an interview with a Wikipedia administrator known by the pseudonym Essjay, who was described as a tenured professor of theology.^[132] Essjay's Wikipedia user page^[133] (now removed) made the following claim:

I am a tenured professor of theology at a private university in the eastern United States; I teach both undergraduate and graduate theology. I have been asked repeatedly to reveal the name of the institution, however, I decline to do so; I am unsure of the consequences of such an action, and believe it to be in my best interests to remain anonymous.

Essjay also claimed on his userpage that he held four academic degrees: Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies (B.A.), Master of Arts in Religion (M.A.R.), Doctorate of Philosophy in Theology (Ph.D.), and Doctorate in Canon Law (JCD). Essjay specialized in editing articles about religion on Wikipedia, including subjects such as "the penitential rite, transubstantiation, the papal tiara";^[131] on one occasion he was called in to give some "expert testimony" on the status of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church.^[134] In January 2007, Essjay was hired as a manager with Wikia, a wiki-hosting service founded by Wales and Angela Beesley. In February, Wales appointed Essjay as a member of the Wikipedia Arbitration Committee, a group with powers to issue binding rulings in disputes relating to Wikipedia.^[135]

In late February 2007 *The New Yorker* added an editorial note to its article on Wikipedia stating that it had learned that Essjay was Ryan Jordan, a 24-year-old college dropout from Kentucky with no advanced degrees and no teaching experience.^[136] Initially Jimmy Wales commented on the issue of Essjay's identity: "I regard it as a pseudonym and I don't really have a problem with it." Larry Sanger, co-founder^{[137][138][139]} of Wikipedia, responded to Wales on his Citizendium blog by calling Wales' initial reaction "utterly breathtaking, and ultimately tragic." Sanger said the controversy "reflects directly on the judgment and values of the management of Wikipedia."^[140]



Wikipedia co-founder
Larry Sanger, who left
Wikipedia to found
Citizendium

Wales later issued a new statement saying he had not previously understood that "EssJay used his false credentials in content disputes." He added: "I have asked EssJay to resign his positions of trust within the [Wikipedia] community."^[141] Sanger responded the next day: "It seems Jimmy finds nothing wrong, nothing trust-violating, with the act itself of openly and falsely touting many advanced degrees on Wikipedia. But there most obviously is something wrong with it, and it's just as disturbing for Wikipedia's head to fail to see anything wrong with it."^[142]

On March 4, Essjay wrote on his user page that he was leaving Wikipedia, and he also resigned his position with Wikia.^[143] A subsequent article in *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville) suggested that the new résumé he had posted at his Wikia page was exaggerated.^[144] The March 19, 2007 issue of *The New Yorker* published a formal apology by Wales to the magazine and Stacy Schiff for Essjay's false statements.^[145]

Discussing the incident, the *New York Times* noted that the Wikipedia community had responded to the affair with "the fury of the crowd", and observed:

The Essjay episode underlines some of the perils of collaborative efforts like Wikipedia that rely on many contributors acting in good faith, often anonymously and through self-designated user names. But it also shows how the transparency of the Wikipedia process—all editing of entries is marked and saved—allows readers to react to suspected fraud.^[146]

The Essay incident received extensive media coverage, including a national U.S. television broadcast on ABC's *World News with Charles Gibson*^[147] and the March 7, 2007, Associated Press story.^[148] The controversy has led to a proposal that users claiming to possess academic qualifications should have to provide evidence before citing them in Wikipedia content disputes.^[149] The proposal was not accepted.^[150]

Anonymity

Wikipedia has been criticised for allowing editors to contribute anonymously—or pseudonymously. Some argue that this creates a lack of accountability.^{[123][151]} Some say this also causes incivility in debates between Wikipedians.^{[123][151]} For privacy reasons, Wikipedia even forbids editors to reveal information about an anonymous editor on Wikipedia.^[152] A whistleblower in violation of this policy may be banned from Wikipedia.^[153]

In Wikipedia itself, the term "anonymous" is used in a much narrower sense than in the citations above – namely, only those editors who do not have a registered account and use an auto-generated IP-labeled account are called anonymous, or "anons".

Editorial process

Further information: Academic studies about Wikipedia § Power plays

Level of debate, edit wars and harassment

The standard of debate on Wikipedia has been called into question by persons who have noted that contributors can make a long list of salient points and pull in a wide range of empirical observations to back up their arguments, only to have them ignored completely on the site.^[154] An academic study of Wikipedia articles found that the level of debate among Wikipedia editors on controversial topics often degenerated into counterproductive squabbling:

"For uncontroversial, 'stable' topics self-selection also ensures that members of editorial groups are substantially well-aligned with each other in their interests, backgrounds, and overall understanding of the topics ... For controversial topics, on the other hand, self-selection may produce a strongly misaligned editorial group. It can lead to conflicts among the editorial group members, continuous edit wars, and may require the use of formal work coordination and control mechanisms. These may include intervention by administrators who enact dispute review and mediation processes, [or] completely disallow or limit and coordinate the types and sources of edits."^[155]

In 2008, a team from the Palo Alto Research Center found that for editors that make between two and nine edits a month, the percentage of their edits being reverted had gone from 5% in 2004 to about 15%, and people who only make one edit a month were being reverted at a 25% rate.^[156] According to *The Economist* magazine

(2008), "The behaviour of Wikipedia's self-appointed deletionist guardians, who excise anything that does not meet their standards, justifying their actions with a blizzard of acronyms, is now known as "wiki-lawyering".^[157] In regards to the decline in the number of Wikipedia editors since the 2007 policy changes, another study stated this was partly down to the way "in which newcomers are rudely greeted by automated quality control systems and are overwhelmed by the complexity of the rule system."^[158]

Another complaint about Wikipedia focuses on the efforts of contributors with idiosyncratic beliefs, who push their point of view in an effort to dominate articles, especially controversial ones.^{[159][160]} This sometimes results in revert wars and pages being locked down. In response, an Arbitration Committee has been formed on the English Wikipedia that deals with the worst alleged offenders – though a conflict resolution strategy is actively encouraged before going to this extent. Also, to stop the continuous reverting of pages, Jimmy Wales introduced a "three-revert rule",^[161] whereby those users who reverse the effect of others' contributions to one article more than three times in a 24-hour period may be blocked.

In a 2008 article in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Wikipedia contributor David Shankbone contended that he had been harassed and stalked because of his work on Wikipedia, had received no support from the authorities or the Wikimedia Foundation, and only mixed support from the Wikipedia community. Shankbone wrote that "If you become a target on Wikipedia, do not expect a supportive community."^[162]

Consensus and the "hive mind"

Oliver Kamm, in an article for *The Times*, expressed skepticism toward Wikipedia's reliance on consensus in forming its content:^[6]

Wikipedia seeks not truth but consensus, and like an interminable political meeting the end result will be dominated by the loudest and most persistent voices.

Wikimedia advisor Benjamin Mako Hill acknowledged Wikipedia's disproportional representation of viewpoints:

In Wikipedia, debates can be won by stamina. If you care more and argue longer, you will tend to get your way. The result, very often, is that individuals and organizations with a very strong interest in having Wikipedia say a particular thing tend to win out over other editors who just want the encyclopedia to be solid, neutral, and reliable. These less-committed editors simply have less at stake and their attention is more distributed.^[163]

Wikimedia steward Dariusz Jemielniak admits:

Tiring out one's opponent is a common strategy among experienced Wikipedians [...] I have resorted to it many times.^[164]

In his article, *Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism* (first published online by *Edge: The Third Culture*, 30 May 2006), computer scientist and digital theorist Jaron Lanier describes Wikipedia as a "hive mind" that is "for the most part stupid and boring", and asks, rhetorically, "why pay attention to it?" His thesis follows:

The problem is in the way the Wikipedia has come to be regarded and used; how it's been elevated to such importance so quickly. And that is part of the larger pattern of the appeal of a new online collectivism that is nothing less than a resurgence of the idea that the collective is all-wise, that it is desirable to have influence concentrated in a bottleneck that can channel the collective with the most verity and force. This is different from representative democracy, or meritocracy. This idea has had dreadful consequences when thrust upon us from the extreme Right or the extreme Left in various historical periods. The fact that it's now being re-introduced today by prominent technologists and futurists, people who in many cases I know and like, doesn't make it any less dangerous.^[165]

Lanier goes on to argue the economic trend to reward entities that aggregate information, rather than those that actually generate content. In the absence of "new business models", the popular demand for content will be sated by mediocrity, thus reducing or even eliminating any monetary incentives for the production of *new* knowledge.^[165]

Lanier's opinions produced some strong disagreement. Internet consultant Clay Shirky noted that Wikipedia has many internal controls in place and is not a mere mass of unintelligent collective effort:

Neither proponents nor detractors of hive mind rhetoric have much interesting to say about Wikipedia itself, because both groups ignore the details... Wikipedia is best viewed as an engaged community that uses a large and growing number of regulatory mechanisms to manage a huge set of proposed edits... To take the specific case of Wikipedia, the Seigenthaler/Kennedy debacle catalyzed both soul-searching and new controls to address the problems exposed, and the controls included, inter alia, a greater focus on individual responsibility, the very factor "Digital Maoism" denies is at work.^[166]

Excessive rule-making

Kat Walsh, a former chair of the Wikimedia Foundation, has criticized Wikipedia's increasingly complex policies, saying "It was easier when I joined in 2004... Everything was a little less complicated.... It's harder and harder for new people to adjust."^[167] According to top Wikipedia administrator Oliver Moran, "policy creep" is

"the real barrier".^[58]

In his 2014 book titled *Common Knowledge?: An Ethnography of Wikipedia*, Wikipedia steward Dariusz Jemielniak asserts that the sheer complexity of the rules and laws governing content and editor behavior has become excessive and creates a learning burden for new editors.^{[8][9]} Jemielniak suggests actively abridging and rewriting the rules and laws to fall within a fixed and reasonable limit of size and complexity to remedy their excessive complexity and size.^{[8][9]}

In 2013, a study by Aaron Halfaker of the University of Minnesota argued that Wikipedia's rules have had the unintended effect of driving away new contributors to the site.^[10]

Social stratification

Further information: Academic studies about Wikipedia § Work distribution and social strata

It has been argued that, despite the perception of Wikipedia as a "shining example of Web democracy", "a small number of people are running the show".^[168] In an article on Wikipedia conflicts in 2007, *The Guardian* discussed "a backlash among some editors, who argue that blocking users compromises the supposedly open nature of the project and the imbalance of power between users and administrators may even be a reason some users choose to vandalise in the first place" based on the experiences of one editor who became a vandal after his edits were reverted and he was blocked for edit warring.^[169]

See also

- Censorship of Wikipedia
- Deletionism and inclusionism in Wikipedia
- History of Wikipedia
- List of Wikipedia controversies
- Reliability of Wikipedia
- Wikipedia:Criticisms
- Wikipedia:Press coverage
- Wikipedia:Replies to common objections
- Wikipedia:Why Wikipedia is not so great

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External links

- [1] (<http://wikipediocracy.com/2014/11/03/a-compendium-of-wikipedia-criticism/>)
- The Geographically Uneven Coverage of Wikipedia - Oxford Internet Institute - University of Oxford (<http://geography.oii.ox.ac.uk/2014/02/the-geographically-uneven-coverage-of-wikipedia/>)

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