

Mason Laney

28 Jan 2020

Wikipedia: An Unlikely Hero

Amassing the entirety of world knowledge into a single, free, adless source. It seems like a lofty, if not impossible goal. But it's the mission statement behind Wikipedia, the largest and most popular reference work on the internet. A portmanteau of *wiki*, the Hawaiian word for 'quick', and 'encyclopedia', Wikipedia.org is a free online encyclopedia available in hundreds of different languages. It is an open-collaboration project, meaning that anyone can access, edit, and submit articles, though popular articles can be locked to prevent the spread of misinformation. Wikipedia is extraordinarily popular, consistently ranking among the most-visited websites worldwide ("Wikipedia"). But how did this influential internet institution come to be?

In early 2000, thirty-year-old Jimmy Wales, who had recently struck it rich as an options trader, decided to embark on an ambitious project that had been much discussed but never fully realized: a free online encyclopedia. Wales reached out to thirty-one-year-old Ph.D. student Larry Sanger—who he met on an online Usenet discussion group—and recruited him to be the editor-in-chief of the project. In March, the two launched Nupedia, initially funded by Wales's company Bomis (Rosenzweig; "History of Wikipedia"; "Wikipedia"). Articles on Nupedia, unlike on the modern Wikipedia, were written by experts and carefully vetted and reviewed by professionals. Because of this extensive process, Nupedia only managed to produce twenty or so articles during its first year and a half of being online. After learning of a piece of software known as WikiWikiWeb that allowed for easy, user-friendly editing of web pages, Sanger was

inspired to create Wikipedia to serve as a feeder site that would produce informal articles that Nupedia editors could build upon and revise (Rosenzweig; “History of Wikipedia”).

Quickly after its launch in January of 2001, Wikipedia began to grow exponentially—much to the surprise of Wales and Sanger. Within the first month, the site was home to over 1,000 articles; within the first two years—100,000. As the turn-of-the-century dot-com boom started to slow, Bomis started rapidly losing money, forcing the company to lay off Sanger in early 2002. While Sanger continued to work on Wikipedia as a volunteer for the next several months, he eventually split from the project in January 2003, citing the site’s hostility towards experts. Nupedia went under in September of that year, leaving Wales and Wikipedia in prime position to dominate the internet encyclopedia landscape (Rosenzweig; “History of Wikipedia”).

And dominate they did: by the end of 2004, Wikipedia was home to over a million articles spanning a hundred different languages (Rosenzweig). In 2005, the site became the most popular reference work on the internet. In 2006, the English Wikipedia gained its millionth article, and the site gained mainstream media attention after several congressional aids were caught changing their representatives’ Wikipedia biography pages in order to make the seem more favorable to the public. In 2007, Wikipedia reached the milestone of five million registered editor accounts, with over 50,000 active editors per day. In 2008, the site published its ten millionth article and surpassed two billion total words. In 2009, the website temporarily crashed following Michael Jackson’s death, after nearly a million visitors attempted to access Jackson’s biography in a single hour. In 2010, Wikipedia experienced its billionth user edit, and in 2011,

the organization held hundreds of events worldwide to celebrate the site's tenth anniversary ("History of Wikipedia").

After seeing the tremendous success of Wikipedia, Wales decided to create the Wikimedia Foundation in order to incorporate all of his projects under one roof and fund them through nonprofit means. Along with its encyclopedia, Wikimedia became home to a myriad of other ventures, most notably Wiktionary (an online dictionary and thesaurus, founded in 2002), Wikiquote (a collection of popular quotations, launched in 2003), Wikibooks and Wikisource (a collection of textbooks and a digital library, respectively, also launched in 2003), and Wikimedia Commons (a site created in 2004 for the purpose of hosting images and other media for the Wikimedia sites). The institution now also houses Wikivoyage (a travel guide), Wikispecies (a taxonomy catalog), Wikinews (a news site), Wikiversity (a collection of guides and online courses), and Wikidata (a knowledge base for data science), along with several other coordination and infrastructure sites. Additionally, the organization holds an annual international conference known as Wikimania to discuss Wikimedia's cultural impact and detail upcoming initiatives ("Wikimedia Foundation").

While the expansion of Wikipedia (and its related Wikimedia institutions) has slowed since its peak in the mid-2000s, the sites continue to experience steady growth. In 2014, it was reported that Wikipedia consistently amassed over 18 billion page views per month, coming from nearly half a billion unique visitors ("Wikipedia"). In 2018, the web traffic analysis company Alexa Internet, Inc. declared Wikipedia to be the fifth most popular website in the world, behind only Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Baidu (a popular Chinese search engine, often seen as the Chinese equivalent of Google) ("Wikipedia.org Traffic Statistics"). As of 2020,

Wikipedia is available in 309 different languages, 16 of which feature over a million articles. In total, these 309 language versions comprise over 50 million different articles, with thousands more being added every day (“History of Wikipedia”; “Size of Wikipedia”; “Wikipedia”).

Thus, it is no stretch to say that Wikipedia has had extraordinary cultural and societal impact. Yet, despite the site’s popularity, Wikipedia has garnered significant amounts of criticism, especially from educators and other academics (Chandler; Crovitz; Valenza). Anyone who has grown up in the past two decades can tell you about the widespread animosity towards Wikipedia in the classroom. In fact, from the way many teachers talk about it, you would think that it is the bane of their existence. Numerous school districts have completely banned access to Wikipedia on school computers, and it is rare to find a middle– or high school teacher that does not explicitly forbid their students from citing it as a source on a research paper. Some school officials have gone so far as to launch campaigns discouraging their students from even viewing the site, such as Easton Area High School librarian Linda O’Connor, who attached posters saying “Just Say ‘No’ to Wikipedia” to every computer in the school library (Crovitz).

And it’s not just educators who have an aversion to the internet encyclopedia: as its popularity grew, so did the number of news articles attacking it. Once Wikipedia gained mainstream success in the mid-2000s, it became common to see headlines such as “Wikipedia—The Dumbing Down of World Knowledge” and “Wisdom? More like dumbness of the crowds” (Black; Kamm). Though many of these articles are rather extreme in their condemnation of the site, they do bring up legitimate complaints. The most common criticism of Wikipedia comes from the fact that anyone can make edits to articles. It’s obvious as to why this appears problematic: if anyone can create an account to edit an article, and users are anonymous,

then how can we trust that anything on the site is credible or correct? (Black; Kamm; “Criticism of Wikipedia”) Plus, there have been concrete examples of vandalism in the past—most notably the 2005 Seigenthaler biography incident, in which an anonymous user edited the biography of American political figure John Seigenthaler to include erroneous and unsubstantiated claims that he was a suspect in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The error went uncorrected for four months, at which point Seigenthaler had to call Jimmy Wales himself in order to get it taken down (“Criticism of Wikipedia”).

Wikipedia has also sustained criticism for exhibiting gender bias due to the fact that a large majority (around 85 or 90 percent) of editors are male, especially on the English version. A computational linguistics analysis of the site backed up this complaint, finding that articles about female figures were more likely to discuss gender and the family, pointing to the idea that male was viewed as the “null”, or default, gender (“Criticism of Wikipedia”; “Gender Bias on Wikipedia”). Additionally, Wikipedia has come under fire for demonstrating liberal bias, Western bias, and racial bias, as well as for containing misleading omissions and inconsistencies in the amount of information present in different articles (“Criticism of Wikipedia”).

Still, while it may not be perfect, to write off Wikipedia as dangerous and useless would be a mistake. The commonly held idea that “anyone can edit any article” is somewhat of a misconception. Wikipedia administrators have the ability to place different levels of protection on articles, so pages which are popular, extensive, or prone to vandalism are frequently “locked” so that they cannot be edited without review from admins (“Protection Policy”). Plus, many of the horror stories about inaccurate information and vandalism happened early in the site’s history (though unfortunately, the reputation has stuck). Nowadays, Wikipedia has adequate protections

in place to prevent such issues from occurring, and the sheer volume of users that patrol and review the site means that any attempted vandalism will be corrected shortly thereafter (Chandler; Crovitz; Valenza).

The information on the site is more reliable than many give it credit for. In 2005, *Nature* published a study analyzing popular science articles from Wikipedia and Encyclopædia Britannica. The experts involved in the study found that across the 42 articles in question, Wikipedia's level of scientific accuracy was only slightly below Britannica's. While both sources contained numerous small inaccuracies and omissions, each encyclopedia presented only four serious errors, described as "misinterpretations of important concepts" (Chandler; "Wikipedia"). Thus, while the site may not have the technical precision and rigor of a peer-reviewed scientific journal, it is generally reliable as a reference work and just as accurate as many traditional sources of information.

Moreover, Wikipedia has the potential to be a useful pedagogical tool if the stigma against it is broken. While it would not be appropriate to cite Wikipedia in an academic journal, the site is accessible and accurate enough that it should be allowed as a reference for essays at a middle school and early high school level, especially for information about the types of well-reviewed basic concepts that students would be researching at these ages. Wikipedia excels at putting complex ideas into layman's terms, and it is often the only source available to students that has this depth of knowledge expressed in an approachable, clear, and non-technical way. That's not to say that students should take everything on Wikipedia as gospel—inaccuracies certainly still exist. However, as long as students are taught to think critically about the source of the information they are viewing and the biases it may contain—something students should be

taught regardless—then Wikipedia may serve as a valuable resource (Chandler; Crovitz; Valenza). As the site itself states, “Wikipedia is more like a library (or like the World Wide Web itself) than like a typical reference work. The mere fact that a book is in the library is no guarantee against bias or misinformation. The same can be said of Wikipedia articles. This does not make them useless, it just means that they should be approached differently than one approaches a typical reference work” (“Researching with Wikipedia”).

The famous saying goes, “history is written by the victors.” But, in the case of Wikipedia, history can be written by everyone. Unlike any other traditional encyclopedia or reference work, Wikipedia enables users from all around the world to research and write about their side of history. It gives anyone, regardless of background, access to the wealth of collective human knowledge without requiring them to have a deep technical background in a subject or access to expensive academic journals. It has helped facilitate the spread of science, history, philosophy, and every other field imaginable across the globe. It has covered worldwide political, civil, and cultural movements as they continue to develop and unfold. And, perhaps most importantly, it has made free, adless access to online information the norm. Despite its faults, Wikipedia has impacted the world in tremendous ways. And, however you may feel about its appropriateness in the classroom, it is impossible to deny that the site’s unwavering dedication to making knowledge freely available has helped make the world a better place.

Works Cited

- Black, Edwin. "Wikipedia—The Dumbing Down of World Knowledge." *History News Network*, History News Network, 2010, historynewsnetwork.org/article/125437.
- Chandler, Cullen J., and Alison S. Gregory. "Sleeping with the Enemy: Wikipedia in the College Classroom." *The History Teacher*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2010, pp. 247–257. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40543290. Accessed 29 Jan. 2020.
- Crovitz, Darren, and W. Scott Smoot. "Wikipedia: Friend, Not Foe." *The English Journal*, vol. 98, no. 3, 2009, pp. 91–97. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40503515. Accessed 29 Jan. 2020.
- Kamm, Oliver. "Wisdom? More like Dumbness of the Crowds." *History News Network*, 16 Aug. 2007, historynewsnetwork.org/article/125437.
- Rosenzweig, Roy. "Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past." *Journal of American History*, vol. 93, no. 1, June 2006, pp. 117–146., doi:10.2307/4486062.
- Valenza, Joyce. "Isn't It Time to Stop Wikipedia Shaming?" *NeverEndingSearch*, School Library Journal, 17 June 2019, blogs.slj.com/neverendingsearch/2019/06/17/isnt-it-time-to-stop-the-wikipedia-shaming/.
- Wikipedia contributors. "Criticism of Wikipedia." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 29 Jan. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Wikipedia.
- Wikipedia contributors. "Gender Bias on Wikipedia." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 26 Jan. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_bias_on_Wikipedia.

Wikipedia contributors. "History of Wikipedia." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 28 Jan. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Wikipedia.

Wikipedia contributors. "Protection Policy." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 25 Jan. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Protection_policy.

Wikipedia contributors. "Researching with Wikipedia." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Feb. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Researching_with_Wikipedia.

Wikipedia contributors. "Size of Wikipedia." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 24 Jan. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Size_of_Wikipedia.

Wikipedia contributors. "Wikimedia Foundation." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 26 Jan. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikimedia_Foundation.

Wikipedia contributors. "Wikipedia." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 27 Jan. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia.

"Wikipedia.org Traffic Statistics." *Alexa*, Alexa Internet, Inc., 3 July 2018, web.archive.org/web/20180703102749/www.alexa.com/siteinfo/wikipedia.org.