lewis levenberg
5 December 2011
Consuming History, Mediating the Past
Final Paper:

Wikipedian Historiography

Introduction

This study tries to explain Wikipedian historiography. As a collaboratively produced digital encyclopedia, Wikipedia presents both an opportunity and a challenge for contemporary history writers. The ability of any user ("editor") to change the information on the site anonymously, pseudonymously, or under their own name, as well as the input of automated editors, or "bots," leads to Wikipedia's reputation as a site where consensus rather than original research measures the success of its contents. The amount of material on the site categorized as history is massive, and still growing - it could provide an introductory history class with a textbook several hundred pages long. However, the status of the site as a basis for historical research also enjoys ongoing controversy. The ability of any user to edit the material means that factual errors are both easily introduced and easily corrected. As an historical source of material, Wikipedia's historical content often provides a simple overview of complex topics; however, the skills or methods by which that content is gathered can vary wildly. One added layer of complexity here comes from the style guides for the site, which emphasize objectivity and neutrality in the tone of writing. This raises questions of authority, especially when facts are under contention. In short, Wikipedia provides a fascinating field through which to examine postmodern claims of the competition of historical narratives as well as social claims of massive popular engagement with the past.

Why Wikipedia?

Since its launch ten years ago, Wikipedia's swift and often contentious rise has brought the online, collaborative encyclopedia to international prominence. It is, by official accounts, the eighth-most popular website on the planet. [1] With close to four million content pages and sixteen million users at the time of this writing, the site's exponential growth since its inception has slowed, but continues, [2] As an encyclopedic undertaking, Wikipedia contains vast tracts of human knowledge. As a social undertaking, Wikipedia's genesis in collaboration through wiki software means that it relies on that vast user base, including automated editors known as bots, to contribute and manage its content. Having grown from a small organization of deeply invested volunteers to a much larger operation with far more casual viewers and editors, the project has had to enact stricter policies, hierarchies, and limitations on its content than ever before.[3] These changes have accompanied the introduction of Wikipedia to a general audience, and have especially impacted its relationship to academic endeavors, in particular, historiography.

Jimmy Wales, the founder and public face of Wikipedia, describes the crux of this relationship when he writes, "Imagine a world in which every single person is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge."[4] Because the site provides neither primary sources nor original research, its approach to "human knowledge," and to historical material in particular, aims for precisely this total product. This means that the site and its editors must rely on already-published material for their sources, not the other way around. Still, the hot-button of Wikipedia as a research tool for students or professional academics endures. Regularly, popular publications and informal debates on the topic ask, how reliable is the site? How much can it be trusted?[5] These issues strike at the epistemological heart of history.

In particular, Wikipedia provides fascinating case studies of both historical writing, and meta-historical writing. Both of these types of articles are discussed in this paper, for similar reasons. Their importance is threefold. First, because of the scale and cultural relevance of the site – its immediate

familiarity to most internet users and to researchers in particular – its *status* as a reference work deserves ongoing examination, in the same way that its content continually undergoes editing, revision, vandalism and addition. Second, because the site provides introductory overviews to many historical topics, and in-depth examination of several, its *approach* cannot be left to assumption. Finally, because Wikipedia merges technological, social, and epistemological issues, its *organization* makes a huge difference in the way that its contents are produced, edited, distributed, received, copied, and used. So, taking up Wikipedia's writing of history as its object, this study begins to formulate certain questions to guide its research.

Questions, Methods, Methodologies

This study most centrally asks how history is written on Wikipedia. It approaches this question through three more detailed ones. First, what are the guiding assumptions, philosophies, and/or interests at work in Wikipedian historiography? Second, does Wikipedia privilege or marginalize certain historical narratives, topics, figures, or voices? If so, which? If not, how? Finally, (how) does Wikipedian historiography relate to academic, popular, social, and other contemporary histories, in its production and reception? By asking these questions, it hopes to find out whether such a thing as Wikipedian historiography exists, and what its consequences might be.

In order to answer these questions, the study uses a collection of methods. First and most importantly, the research involves reading a lot of history on Wikipedia. It must also include readings of the debates and revisions surrounding significant articles, as well as the overall standards and processes for historical writing and editing on the site at large. Because of limited time and space, the process did not involve following all possible links in the articles in question. Instead, relevant articles were collated into PDF "collections" and exported as "e-books," ad-hoc publications based on search parameters. They could thus stand a sustained computational and interpretive textual analysis, along with consideration in their hyperlinked context. Throughout, I refer to the English-language Wikipedia.

There has not been adequate time or space for direct interaction or conversation with Wikipedia editors for this study. To compensate, it includes, as textual evidence, their accounts of contribution and revision. It does so by incorporating previous studies of Wikipedia's users – editors and readers alike – and their statistical and ethnographic results. It also tries to account, at least gesturally, for the agency of the many "bots" whose automatic edits constitute vast portions of the site. Throughout, it adopts a reading and observational strategy that balances narrative with technical form as its points of focus.

A multifaceted framework informs the interpretation of the study's observations. Formal and structural patterns of historiography on the site are the most central objects. It must also contextualize historical content as a process of collaboration and revision. Finally, it must take account of the scope of Wikipedian history, to try to trace how wide of an audience the writing has. Together, these areas of interest delineate and limit what the study can do.

A similarly pluralistic methodology structures that framework, and the questions that the study asks. Affect theory helps explain the tone and other formal characteristics of the writing; marxism helps to understand the context of the site's production of historical knowledge; ethnography or social-historical observation informs the attention to both contribution and to reception; quantitative analysis breaks down the scope and reach of the site; new media studies help unpack the process of production. The study will have answered its questions if it can show the process, form, and significance of historical writing on Wikipedia. The umbrella under which all these disciplines gather might be called an architectural approach to the problem.

Literature Review

As noted above, the primary sources for this study come directly from wikipedia.org. In particular, they are drawn from three categories within the site: its articles on history and historiography, its articles on specific, historically significant topics, and its paratextual material such as revisions, commentary/talk, and guidelines surrounding the content proper. The sample articles analyzed here constitute only a minute fraction of the available material, but their selection aims for a representation of the overall philosophical and historiographical approach that undergirds Wikipedia's historical content.

Secondary sources include previously-undertaken surveys of Wikipedia users, as well as contextual data about the site's historical content, such as how much information it includes, its rates of development, change, and distribution, and the scope of its audience.[6] Phoebe Ayers et al's seminal introductory book "How Wikipedia Works" gives a brilliantly clear and detailed overview of the site's development and day-to-day operations.[7] Its greatest contribution to this study is its explication of the policies, norms, and practices that condition the "voice" of Wikipedia articles. The book also shows how and why one kind of content – for example, scientific articles – must follow the same stylistic and syntactic conventions as all others, including historical articles. Other existing studies of Wikipedia detail the history, structure and context of the site. However, few if any of these deal at length with the impact that Wikipedia has, due to these factors, on producing historical knowledge as such.

Roy Rosenzweig's excellent essay "Can History Be Open Source?" does address this question. However, he warns, "Participation in Wikipedia entries generally maps popular, rather than academic, interests in history." Rosenzweig argues that historians ought to pay attention to Wikipedia, for both pedagogical reasons (because students already rely on it as at least a starting point for their own work) and because the open and democratic model that it propagates, for production and distribution of historical knowledge, could radically affect the professional field in the long run. [8] This study undertakes an examination of some of those long-term implications.

To do so, it draws on a variety of other extant scholarship. The huge study undertaken by Rosenzweig and David Thelen on public historical understanding, "The Presence of the Past," gives this study a gateway for thinking about Wikipedia as a point of access to the past for its audience (and its producers). In their survey of nearly a thousand Americans, Rosenzweig and Thelen gathered a wealth of data about how people interact with the past. They discovered that the most important thing about the past, for most people, was their personal connection to its events, whether individually, through their family, or through a larger social group.[9] When asking how history is written on Wikipedia, then, we can bear in mind that this search for personal connections might motivate contributors to address historical topics in their articles and revisions.

Turning from intentions towards activity, Jerome DeGroot's analysis of popular history shows how Wikipedia and other collaborative, digital historical projects have special conditions attached to their production and distribution.[10] Their existence online, replete with hyperlinks and networked content and contributors, emphasizes the social aspects of their projects. In the realm of the reception of such works, meanwhile, affect theory – in particular, as developed by Melissa Gregg, Alison Landsberg, Sara Ahmed, and Marita Sturken – helps understand how the way in which Wikipedia articles are written, from their choice and style of writing to their incorporation of multimedia elements to the computer interfaces that people must use to access them, affects their reception and interpretation by their audience.[11] Indeed, because Wikipedia aims for a massive popular audience, its affective patterns matter a great deal.

One interesting tack in historiographical theory stems from Georg Lukacs's through Michel Foucault's, Haydn White's, Alun Munslow's, and Claudio Fogu's respective works. Lukacs marks the rise and importance of the historical novel, and leads to Foucault's critique of both traditional history and authorship.[12] Following Foucault's structural interventions, Haydn White and Alun Munslow each address historiography from a postmodern perspective, emphasizing the artifice and narrative implicit in any writing, including historical writing.[13] On these accounts, the most important aspects of history are the way that it is written. In contradistinction, the most important thing about history for many media theorists is the form that it takes.[14] This study acknowledges the validity of both of these positions, as well as of the economic, political, and institutional constraints on any historical endeavor. As it turns to the primary sources, for interpretation and analysis, it tries to bear this complex lesson in mind.

Metahistorical Articles

These three articles are culled from a PDF based on the Wikipedia Category:History. These articles, which deal with the definitions and significance of the field of history, are all "locked," meaning that edits cannot take place willy-nilly, but must be enacted by trusted, higher-level editors, presumeably after some degree of discussion. As representative Wikipedia articles, their approach to the subjects tends to demonstrate the pillars, policies, and guidelines of the encyclopedia in their strong forms.

"History"

The article on "History" at large leads with George Santayana's pithy quote - "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it" - and with an 1892 painting by Nikolaos Gysis, the Allegory of History, before proceeding to define history as "the discovery, collection, organization, and presentation of information about past events."[15] Using a wealth of footnotes that point to introductory historical textbooks and broad surveys, the article walks through the early history of the study of the past, and the etymology of the term itself. Following a "Description" of the field at large, the article extends its focus to small overviews of historiography, historical method, and the role of historians, as well as listing the various areas of historical study and specific schools of thought within the field. It also includes a brief section on "teaching history." There is no summary or conclusion to the article, other than the lists of references, resources, and further reading suggestions both within and outside of Wikipedia.

Observing the intensity of edits to its content shows that far more edits concentrate on the beginning of the article and on the references to its body than on the smaller sub-sections.[16] The dry, flat language, especially in the beginning (e.g. "Historians debate the nature of history and its usefulness"), seems at first to miss the fury and rigor with which the page was constructed. But two factors help explain this. First, the process of community writing, targeted at consensus, discourages lofty prose in favor of the straightforward tone found here; second, the encyclopedic goal, never far from most editors' minds, keeps that consensus focused on clear information rather than elegant expression. As an introduction to the practice of historical writing on Wikipedia, then, this article represents what will follow.

In particular, the article demonstrates the core principles of Wikipedia that most affect its historiography: verifiability (as distinct from truth); neutral point of view (as opposed to argumentation), and no original research (as distinct from synthesis or conjecture). The clearest

example of these principles at work in the central text of the article comes at the list of schools of history. To describe, in the same breath and voice, social history, world history, regional history, and people's history, among many others, requires that the article suspend judgement on any of these. This lack of even obvious conclusions – such as which fields are more dominant today, or why that is – leads to an article that provides a starting point, but little more, for someone curious about what history is, and how it is written.

"Historiography"

Turning to the article on how history is written, one sees few indications of deeper analysis. Though in the "History" article, historiography is given only a paragraph, compared to the eleven or so pages' worth of content here, the expansion on the subject comes only at the level of distinguishing as many different approaches to historiography as the editors can gather.[17] The article begins, as usual, with a brief lead. Here, it is only a sentence long, mostly a quote from one published source, to define the subject. Thence, the article describes narrative historiography, as set forth by Lawrence Stone. It mentions a critique of narrative from social-scientific perspectives that privileges empirical rather than anecdotal evidence, but leaves the implications of this debate unexamined, even as they pertain to Wikipedia itself. This omission, a standing feature of all 50 Wikipedia articles examined during this study, can go unnoticed most of the time. It is precisely at this level, however, of metahistorical definition, that such omissions can matter most.

Consider, for example, the next section in this article, "The history of written history." "For the purposes of this article, history is taken to mean written history recorded in a narrative format for the purpose of informing future generations about events," write the editors. This assumption doubles back on the principles of neutrality and even on the critique of narrative summarized not fifty words earlier in the article. The incongruity between policy and sensible editing, here, brings to mind another of Wikipedia' s own pillars: No Firm Rules. Invoking this flexibility in this context might help address the fundamental problem for this article, both as encyclopedia entry and as community project: it does not reflect upon itself, even from such a nakedly self-referential starting point as historiography. Indeed, digital historiography is accorded no place in the "history of written history" that stretches as far back as ancient Greece and extends to the so-called "Modern Era." This despite the fact that Wikipedia practices just such a digital approach, and an international one to boot.

The section "Approaches to history," further down, makes this clear:

> It is commonly recognized among historians that, in themselves, individual historical facts dealing with names, dates, and places are not particularly meaningful. Such facts will only become useful when assembled with other historical evidence, and the process of assembling this evidence is understood as a particular historiographical approach.

Yet, the long list of approaches immediately afterward does not include anything explicitly or immediately recognizable as Wikipedian. The "process of assembling" the facts here, though it includes a trove of references and sources through which the interested reader can learn more, contains no explicitly historiographical reflection of its own. In other words, the article disavows its own usefulness, because it declines to discuss how Wikipedia's historical evidence is collected and organized.

"Historical Method"

Distinguished in the lead paragraph of this article from historiography and from the philosophy of history, Wikipedia's article on historical method follows the same pattern as described above. While

it gives a sound, basic overview of the topic, it leaves any elements of reflexivity or conclusion out of the content. The article lists "source criticism," "external criticism," "internal criticism," and "synthesis: historical reasoning" as the touchstones of the method. However, there is not a mention to be found of the processes by which Wikipedians construct historical pages.

The inclusion of this article alongside historiography, history, and several others in the "History" category, perhaps, compensates for this aporia. Because editors can approach the issues outlined here, such as reflexivity, on discussion pages and the "Village pump," the site as a whole does not lack these conversations. However, their results – however contradictory – are not included at all in the publicly-facing pages of the category. Though Wikipedians are certainly aware of these challenges, the standard response – that the site is an encyclopedia, not a work of theory – disavows the incredible impact that the site has in scope and reach. To illustrate this, consider three popular, explicitly historical articles, all locked to widescale revision, that adopt these conventions and assumptions, with interesting effects.

Historical Articles

Each of the articles discussed here – U.S. History, the Holocaust, and 9/11 – deal with incontrovertibly popular topics. They all, further, take on large, complex subjects, whose component pieces often require their own articles (not to say unique studies that those articles can cite). Finally, each of the articles must confront the controversies engendered by any discussions of their topics. This analysis considers how Wikipedia represents the events in question, how the articles manage complexity and controversy, and the processes of writing and distribution that affect their significance as sources of information.

"History of the United States"

A distinct article from American History (let alone History of the Americas), "History of the United States" tackles a general overview of the long past of this country. It does not limit itself to particular political or social foci, but it does rein in the scope of its discussion, and proceeds chronologically. The article opens with a brief essay summarizing its contents, though, and contains, as usual, a disproportionate number of edits to its grammar, spelling, punctuation, and references. This attention to detail does not, at the time of this writing, extend throughout the article; errors like a section entitled "Woman suffrage" sneak in throughout the piece. However, the specific debates over how and why to lead off the article in a certain way leads to an interesting debate on the Talk page for the article.

In addition to interesting boilerplate material, such as the different projects of which this article is a part, the Talk page's introduction marks that the article contains especially controversial issues. It reminds editors, as a result, why the policies and guidelines for editing become particularly important in this situation. And yet, interpretation of those guidelines – including which should trump which – becomes a point of focus in an argument between two users.

User:Moxy and User:Rjensen argue on this page about how to edit the citations to the article. Rjensen edited several references to reflect "high quality modern scholarship." Moxy objected to Rjensen's "wholesale" deletion of already-existing references, and to the "POV" (point of view) writing and poor grammar that accompanied Rjensen's edits. Moxy reverts those edits, and Rjensen argues that Moxy's reversion violates "good faith" and privileges weak references over those by respected academics, whom Rjensen holds up as "RS" (reliable sources). The two exchange close to twenty

paragraph-long messages in their argument, including long bulleted lists of some of the references in question.

Another, anonymous editor chimes in halfway through, to enjoin Rjensen to adopt an understanding of the Reliable Source policy that requires verification of material likely to be challenged, such as point-of-view statements. In so doing, the interlocuter suggests, Rjensen would solve this problem, because then the references that Rjensen added would be more explicit, and would adhere to the policy of "verification" over some more abstract ideals of "truth." No one comes to an agreement. In fact, Moxy decides to leave the page out of frustration, adding, "hope the page is still legible in a few day[s]."[18] Earlier that year (2010), Rjensen had exchanged similarly fractious commentary with User:Joker123192, over whether political scientists' narratives of President Obama's elections ought to comprise part of the introductory paragraph to the page, or should be moved to the end.

These exchanges are common throughout the site, and reflect the affective investment that editors have in these historical issues, not only in Wikipedia at large. Their emotional stakes run deep enough that minor technical and grammatical matters can set two editors at odds permanently. The importance of this personal attachment to this way of writing history ought not to go unnoticed.

"The Holocaust"

Thinkers of history and writing from the mid-twentieth century onward have struggled with how to represent the Holocaust. Problems of affective or bare poetics, detailed or euphemistic narration, and political correctness plague various accounts, sometimes paralyzingly so. In this context, the Wikipedia entry on the Holocaust succeeds in a peculiar way.[19] Its straightforward, ostensibly neutral tone and detailed content – due in part to the vast literature on the subject available elsewhere on the Web and in historical literature – addresses several tricky topics with aplomb, including Holocaust denial and the details of genocide. It treats the various parties involved with the events with arguably equal rigor, from Nazis to Jews; the context of the genocide in World War II is addressed at length, and the ramifications of the Holocaust are given as much weight as the sordid details of massacres and concentration camps. The article has been nominated several times for internal awards on Wikipedia, thought it has never been accepted for those recognitions. The most interesting parts of the article, however, come behind the scenes, as usual – on the Talk page.

As should be expected, despite the stated principles that the talk page is not a forum for discussion of the events, such discussion takes place under the thin guise of talking about how to edit the page. One exchange in particular draws attention: 28 replies were made to the comment "Um..." from mid-June to 1 August, 2006. [20] The conversation was sparked by a comment from a relative newcomer to the site, User:Max W. Gore, whose account has since been taken down. He writes:

> Shouldn't we stop Jews from editing this page? I mean, it's going to be filled up with POV if you allow them to say whatever the Hell they want about the Holocaust.
>
> (gets shot)
>
> (gasping for breath) It was just a thought...

Within ten minutes, User:DLand responds to admonish the "poor taste" of the remark, and to warn that even if it was a joke, the comment could lead to Max W. Gore's being banned. The conversation, however, continues apace, drifting off into whether Jews constitute a race, what the discrimination policies on Wikipedia actually are and how they interact with the NPOV policy, and how far to take the assumption of good faith among editors. When one User:Kaseryn, tries to rein in the

responses to Max W. Gore, another, User:Wallie, responds to claim that Kaseryn has "deliberately set a climate which encourages these sentiments." The ensuing digression to another, related talk page highlights the social interactions with which the editing is fraught.

The talk page in general, which stretches from the page's inception around 2001 (early archives are lost) until just a few days before this writing, shows just how contentious the topic at hand can become. With conversations ranging from philosophy and manners to current events and pop culture, the catalyst of the Holocaust proves its potential to spark the continuing production of knowledge. To understand the new historical knowledge produced *by* Wikipedia's account, some acknowledgment of the function of the talk pages is crucial.

"September 11 Attacks"

The talk pages are equally crucial to understand the impact of the article on 11 September 2011.[21] But the article itself, and its surrounding portals and projects, deserves notice on its own merits. It takes the familiar representational approach to the events, using language as neutral and linear as possible. Formerly a featured-article, but eventually removed from that list, the page works from a huge variety of sources, and organizes them according to those indomitable criteria of verifiability and already-published research. The collective efforts of the editors details every important involved party and individual to the events, and even manages to make some inroads on a description of the political and contemporary context of the day. Its sections on short-term responses and long-term effects of the attacks go beyond major broadcast news outlets' accounts of those issues.

The article is locked to untrusted editors, who have to request the changes they would like to see. Meanwhile, the talk page on the article includes an archive nearly sixty webpages deep. Even that talk page, at this point, is "semi-protected" and changes are limited by administrators. [22] The ability of 11 September 2011 to spark debate and controversy is well-reflected here, as it is in the Holocaust article's discussion pages. But controversy and hot-headedness do not always prevail in these discussions. One fascinating and on-topic conversation, early in the archives, deals with the issue of memorializing the victims of the attacks as part of the article.

It is worth quoting in its entirety:

> Subpages and/or Memoriam
>
> I think many of the subpages here are too much of a good thing. Of course this was a terrible event, but does an encyclopedia need lists of victims (some even with articles on them...), missing persons, media slogans, New York Times articles, related jokes, etc.? I don't think so. If I read an encyclopedia, I want to get the real info. What happened, what was were the important consequences etc. All the other info may be nice for a site dedicated to the subject, but not for an encyclopedia. Also the "In Memoriam" seems a bit overdone for an encyclopedia - it does not give me the idea Wikipedia is authorative or neutral on the subject.
> Otherwise, we should have a list of all the six million Jews killed in WWII, and of all the other millions and millions of war and violence victims, and place "In Memoriam" signs there as well.
>
> Summarising: this collection of subpages should be rewritten to make a real encyclopedia article.
>
> June 14, 2002 jheijmans
>
> I agree in general, but except for the main page these pages are the most popular for the entire site and are listed very high on google. I would hate to see them go for this and personal emotional reasons which I can't ignore. These pages are a reflection of how people tried to cope with an event of unprecedented

magnitude. Can we hold off on making any major changes until at least the year anniversary of this event has passed? --maveric149

> How about moving the "in memorium" thing over to the top of the list of victims? That way at least the front page looks more "professional," and people who are going to look at the list of victims are likely to expect something like the "in memorium" banner there.
> We can start trimming some of the less encyclopedic stuff gradually over time, perhaps replacing it with more encyclopedic stuff in the process. Bryan Derksen

Yes, I noticed their popularity as well, that has kept me from writing this earlier. And maybe that means these should not be removed, but moved to another appropriate location (e.g. other website). I also see this is a sensitive topic, but Wikipedia should remain neutral, and this page does not really show neutrality. It would be fine with me to wait until a year afterwards or so before making the changes (though pages as "Give blood" are no longer useful anymore of course). I will (re)move the "In memoriam" block in a moment, however. -- jheijmans

> One potential future home for some of this stuff could be Wikipedia:Historical Wikipedia pages. True, the sept. 11 thing isn't directly wikipedia-related, but it seems reasonable to me that we might want to keep a copy of this article for posterity over there even though a lot of it is obsolete or non-encyclopedic. Plus, the transition can be made gracefully, with redirections.
> No hurry, of course. Bryan Derksen

These editors notice that as an artifact of the events, this article often comes closer to journalism than encyclopedic writing. They value its historical significance, though, and their push to gently edit the article to become more encyclopedic reflects their concern to preserve that significance. Noting the importance of the article's google ratings, as well as "personal emotional reasons," the group comes to the kind of consensus that often appears only hopefully in editorial discussions on the site.

A delicate and often dangerous issue for the editors of Wikipedia to address, the site's topicality still commands attention from its users and visitors. In an effort to delineate Wikipedia's borders, and to organize the mass of other types of user-generated, collaborative content that does not fit on the site, the Wikimedia Foundation also manages other related projects: WikiNews, for example, is supposed to be the forum for dealing with current events. Still, Wikipedia has the power to define the news for many of its millions of visitors. Its democracy and mutability sometimes, as in this case, result in profoundly detailed coverage that matters deeply to its audience.

Wikipedian Historiography

How is history written on Wikipedia?

Wikipedian historiography stems from a combination of the site's core policies with the evolution of its content. The three most salient core concepts to the site are, of course, Verification, (V) No Original Research (NOR), and Neutral Point of View (NPOV). Verification insists that all statements in all articles be cited. NOR tries to limit speculation and even synthesis by requiring that all citations refer to published, reliable sources. NPOV works against diatribe and opinion, especially when combined with the other two core policies. Thus, editors on the site approach historical topics from this encyclopedic perspective.

When they write and edit articles, then, users work towards a specifically transparent style. The misconception that might occur in this context would be an *absence* of affective strategy. Rather, I would suggest, affect here is technical, mechanical, and cold. Together with highly linear narratives that

avoid conclusions or summary judgment, and granular, modular, schematic organization for each article and for the site at large, historical articles on the site work hard to implement this strategy. Its effect, as observed here (but also as stated by respondents to user surveys in other studies), is of objectivity, introduction, and – most importantly – *authority*.

Affective authority matters a great deal, and becomes the subject of debate, when comparing Wikipedia to other historical, encyclopedic, or digital projects. Its sometimes misleading or erroneous content, and its extreme prominence online, raises the question of its technological medium. Formally, the site is comprised not only of the servers, bandwidth carriers, and home PCs that make up its network. It is also composed of the input of a great deal of volunteer labor. Much of that labor is invested in the organization of its information. Each of the articles described above, for example, contains hundreds (if not thousands) of hyperlinks, especially to other pages on Wikipedia. The availability of references that simply point to the cited information makes transparency and immediacy key functions of digital knowledge production. At a higher level, when the site's users group pages into portals and projects, they make implicit epistemological claims – each of the articles examined above, for example, comprise part of WikiPortal:History. Their specific characterizations, then, including their metadata, not only affects how people find the information, but also how they approach it as an audience. In these cases, and in general for historical writing on Wikipedia, the ability to provide a reliable reference resource depends in large part on the viability of its digital form. It also, however, manipulates its digital environment, acting as a stable (if editable) repository of historical knowledge, and a venue in which any user with a PC can make or request the changes they wish to see.

Related to this question of intention, the issues of authorship, collaboration, and research that inform Wikipedian history also pound home the historical significance of the site. Revision and collaboration marks the most significant difference from traditional academic history, in which individual authorship and closed-door revisions to monographic texts are the order of the discipline. However, the process of writing an article on the site depends on that openness only to the extent that an article remains largely unfinished. SOFIXIT is the watchword for most editors, when confronted with complaints about content, except once an article is deemed complete enough to be locked from random edits. The curious role of bots also matters a great deal here. When considered in historiographical context, the automated edits made by bots (which often outnumber those of human users on individual bases) calls into sharp question the role of history as a specifically human – not to say humanist – undertaking. Finally, the overlap between traditional historians' citations, references, and research patterns actually overlaps a great deal with those of Wikipedians.[23] This works best when Wikipedia's editors cite professional historians well, and not so well the other way around, but it does encourage interaction between academic historians and the cornucopia of information available by and through collaborative, open, digital, historical knowledge production.

Whatever validity or significance Wikipedia has as historical knowledge, then, depends upon one's viewpoint, and to what Wikipedia is thought to be. From a history professor's standpoint, the inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the site's content can condemn it to banishment from their classroom. However, from a student's perspective, the site not only serves as a launch pad for their investigations, but provides a way to even formulate questions at all. As an historical resource, then, Wikipedia is clearly problematic; its value is as a place to poke around and begin research, not as a place to find deep or comprehensive answers to tough questions. However, as an artifact, especially through which to gauge popular engagement with the past, or to determine how popular historical accounts come to be, the site – and especially the discussion pages – can become invaluable to historians. It provides far better documentation of its process than does mass-media journalism, for

example, when covering current and recent events, although it does still tend to favor its users' interests over generally important issues. That bias may be changing, though, as fewer "elite" and more "common" editors take over the bulk of revisions and contributions over time.

Finally, as a means through which to connect to the past, the site presents a unique opportunity to history classrooms. The students can actively and without filters produce historical knowledge, under the guidance of a trained historian, and using all the tools of digital research, composition, and scholarship available. This newly-produced knowledge can help bridge the gaps between popularity and scholarship, both bringing in newly interested contributors, and distributing good knowledge to an incredibly large audience.

This study has been limited mostly by time. It could not undertake a comprehensive reading of the wealth of representative historical articles and talk pages available, nor could it talk at any length or over any consistent medium with editors and readers of the site. However, what it leaves unanswered – what voices are privileged or marginalized, for example – can be first inferred (national narratives loom larger and marginal theories are avoided) and later tested more rigorously. Future research ought also to take a careful inventory of the talk pages, which contain far richer writing, including salient historiographical commentary, than do the articles proper. Still, the essay has hoped to demonstrate something original and userful about Wikipedian historiography.

Conclusion

Obvious claims are too easily overlooked in a seminar paper like this, so I reiterate: Wikipedia is not an historical project, but an encyclopedic one. Because of or despite this, though, it has certain special characteristics when writing history. These can be grouped into assumptions, practices, and consequences.

The guiding assumptions, philosophies, and interests at work in Wikipedian historiography include a commitment to the eventual compilation of human knowledge, and to its availability to anyone. These assumptions also include the possibility (even if increasing unlikelihood) of reaching consensus among its authors, of providing neutral, objective coverage of its topics, and of remaining immune to the political economies of consumer capital that surround it, by relying on donations rather than, for example, advertisements. In its collaborative, distributed production and widespread reception, Wikipedian historiography distances itself from academic history, but it finds a point of interaction with other popular, social, and informal histories. This presents an ongoing challenge to the site's editors, to balance this interaction with its core principles.

Most significantly, perhaps, Wikipedia exists as an historical artifact as well as a purveyor of historical knowledge. Its coverage of more current events and minor things of interest to its editors maps out, as Rosenzweig observed, popular rather than scholarly interests.[24] Its ongoing movement towards further democratization, however, will both decrease the quality of the articles and increase their accessibility to all – a profound compromise, if not a paradox.[25] These changes will have to play out both online and in the academic historical world.

I have argued, in short, that a Wikipedian historiography does in fact exist. It does so, I suggest, through a process of disavowal, by eliminating (through revision and collaboration) its particular points of view and advancing a strategy of neutrality and openness. This historiography has clear epistemological consequences. As a mode of production of historical knowledge, Wikipedia remains a starting point, not an end in itself.

REFERENCES

Agnew, Vanessa. "History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present." *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (2007): 299-312.

Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Objects." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg, and Gregory J. Seigworth, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Ayers, Phoebe, Charles Matthews, and Ben Yates. *How Wikipedia Works - and How You Can be a Part of it*. Online: No Starch Press, 2008.

Burke, Peter. "Performing History: The Importance of Occasions." *Rethinking History* 9, no. 1 (2005): 35-52.

Carriger, Michelle Liu. "Historionics: Neither Here Nor There With Historical Reality Tv." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (2010):

Classen, Christoph. "Balanced Truth: Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* Among History, Memory, and Popular Culture." *History and Theory* 47 (2009): 77-102.

Cohen, Daniel Jared, and Roy Rosenzweig. *Digital History*. 2006.

Cohen, Noam. "A History Department Bans Citing Wikipedia as a Research Source." *New York Times*, 2007.

Cook, Alexander. "The Use and Abuse of Historical Reenactment: Thoughts on Recent Trends in Public History." *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 46, no. 3 (2004): 487-96.

de Groot, Jerome. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 2008.

de Groot, Jerome. "'Perpetually Dividing and Suturing the Past and Present': *Mad Men* and the Illusions of History." *Rethinking History* 15, no. 2 (2011): 269-85.

Fogu, Claudio. "Digitalizing Historical Consciousness." *History and Theory* 47 (2009): 103-21.

Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Glott, Ruediger, Schmidt, Philipp, and Ghosh, Rishab. "Wikipedia Survey - First Results: Working Draft." (2009):

Gregg, Melissa. "A Neglected History: Richard Hoggart's Discourse of Empathy." *Rethinking History* 7, no. 3 (2003): 285-306.

Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. "Introduction: An Inventory of Shimmers." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg, and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2010.

Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth, (eds.) *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Grusin, Richard. *Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Hunt, Tristram. "Reality, Identity and Empathy: The Changing Face of Social History Television." *Journal of Social History* (2006):

Kittur, Aniket, Ed Chi, Bryan A. Pendleton, Bongwon Suh, and Todd Mytkowicz. "Power of the Few Vs. Wisdom of the Crowd: Wikipedia and the Rise of the Bourgeoisie." Paper presented at the 25th Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Chicago, 2007.

Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory*. Columbia University Press: New York, 2004.

Landsberg, Alison. "Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 22 (2009): 221-29.

Landsberg, Alison. "Waking the *Deadwood* of History: Listening, Language and the 'Aural Visceral'." *Rethinking History* 14, no. 4 (2010): 531-49.

LeMahieu, D.L. "Digital Memory, Moving Images, and the Absorption of Historical Experience." *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of* 41, no. 1 (2011):

Lih, Andrew. *The Wikipedia Revolution*. New York: Hyperion, 2009.

Munslow, Alan. *Narrative and History*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.

Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007.

Rainie, L., and Tancer, B. "Wikipedia: When in Doubt, Multitudes Seek it Out."

Reagen, Patrick D. *History and the Internet*. 2002.

Rose, Nikolas. "Identity, Genealogy, History." In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall, and Paul du Gay, 128-50. London: Sage, 1996.

Rosenzweig, Roy. *Historians and Audiences: Comment on Tristram Hunt and Geoffrey Timmins*. *Journal of Social History*. 2006.

Rosenzweig, Roy. "Can History be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past." *The Journal of American History* (2006): 117-46.

Rosenzweig, Roy, and Anthony Grafton. *Clio Wired: The Future of the Past*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Rosenzweig, Roy, and David Thelen. *The Presence of the Past*. 2006.

Schulz, Winfried. "Reconstructing Mediatization as an Analytical Concept." *European Journal of Communication* 19 (2004): 87-101.

Slotkin, Richard. "Fiction for the Purposes of History." *Rethinking History* 9, no. 2 (2005): 221-36.

Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

Sturken, Marita. *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism From Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Sturken, Marita. "The Aesthetics of Absence: Rebuilding Ground Zero." *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 3 (2004):

Trinkle, Dennis A., and Scott A. Merriman. *The History Highway: A 21st Century Guide to Internet Resources*. 2006.

Voss, J. "Measuring Wikipedia." Paper presented at the The International Conference of the International Society of Scientometrics and Informetrics, Stockholm, Sweden, 2005.

Weeks, Jeffrey. "Foucault for Historians." *History Workshop* 14 (1982): 106-19.

White, Hayden. "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality." *Rethinking History* 9, no. 2 (2005): 147-57.

contributors, Wikipedia. 2011. History of the United States. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=History_of_the_United_States&oldid=463550092 (accessed 5 December 2011,

contributors, Wikipedia. 2011. Historiography. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Historiography&oldid=463681746 (accessed 5 December 2011,

contributors, Wikipedia. 2011. Historical Method. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Historical_method&oldid=462601836

contributors, Wikipedia. 2011. History. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=History&oldid=462877601 (accessed 5 December 2011,

contributors, Wikipedia. 2011. September 11 Attacks. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=September_11_attacks&oldid=463147828 (accessed 5 December 2011,

contributors, Wikipedia. 2011. The Holocaust. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Holocaust&oldid=462718528 (accessed 5 December 2011,

contributors, Wikipedia. *Wikipedia:Statistics*. Translated by December 2011. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 2011.

Zelizer, Barbie, and Stuart Allen, (eds.) *Journalism After September 11*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Zickurh, Kathryn, and Lee Rainie. *Wikipedia, Past and Present*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center: Internet and American Life Project, 2011.

1   Current rankings on http://alexa.com/, a flawed but standard measurement of website popularity.
2   {Wikipedia contributors, 2011, Wikipedia:Statistics}
3   {Ayers et al., 2008, How Wikipedia Works - And How You Can Be a…}*{Lih, 2009, The Wikipedia Revolution}*
4   Wales, J. "Foreword." in Lih, Andrew. *The Wikipedia Revolution.* New York: Hyperion, 2009.
5   {Cohen, 2007, New York Times}
6   {Glott et al., 2009, Wikipedia Survey - First Results: Working Draft}{Reagen, 2002, History and the Internet}{Zickurh and Rainie, 2011, Wikipedia, past and present}{Voss, 2005, The International Conference of the International Society of Scientometrics and Informetrics, 10}{Trinkle and Merriman, 2006, The History Highway: A 21st Century Guide to Internet Resources}{Kittur et al., 2007, 25th Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems}
7   {Ayers et al., 2008, How Wikipedia Works - And How You Can Be a…}
8   {Rosenzweig, 2006, The Journal of American History, 117-146}
9   {Rosenzweig and Thelen, 2006, The Presence of the Past}
10 {de Groot, 2008, Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture}
11 {Agnew, 2007, Rethinking History, 11, 299-312; Ahmed, 2010, The Affect Theory Reader, Happy Objects; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, The Affect Theory Reader; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, The Affect Theory Reader, Introduction: An Inventory of Shimmers; Grusin, 2010, Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11; Stewart, 2007, Ordinary Affects}
12 Lukacs, G. Historical Novel. Foucault, M. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"; Foucault, M. "What is an Author?"
13 {White, 2005, Rethinking History, 9, 147-157}{Munslow, 2007, Narrative and History}
14 Media theorists{Cohen and Rosenzweig, 2006, Digital History}{Fogu, 2009, History and Theory, 47, 103-121} {Carriger, 2010, Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism}{de Groot, 2011, Rethinking History, 15, 269-285}{Grusin, 2010, Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11}{Landsberg, 2004, Prosthetic Memory}{Nakamura, 2007, Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet}
15 {Wikipedia contributors, 2011, History}
16 Ibid. Edit history of page.
17 {Wikipedia contributors, 2011, Historiography}
18 {Wikipedia contributors, 2011, History of the United States}Talk:History_of_the_United_States
19 {Wikipedia contributors, 2011, The Holocaust}
20 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:The_Holocaust/Archive_11#Um...
21 {Wikipedia contributors, 2011, September 11 attacks}
22 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:September_11_attacks
23 This sometimes leads to confusion: xkcd.com's cartoon, "Citogenesis," explains: https://xkcd.com/978/
24 Rosenzweig and Grafton, 2010, Clio Wired: The Future of the Past}
25 {Kittur et al., 2007, 25th Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems}