Can we trust Wikipedia?
A critical look at the free encyclopedia

Dr. Nuria Plattner
Wikipedia basic facts

Organization foundation and structure

- 2001 Wikipedia launched on wikipedia.com based on earlier project Nupedia by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger
- 2002 Larry Sanger departed due to disagreements on Wikipedia rules
- 2003 Wikimedia foundation founded. The non-profit organization asks for user donations regularly, but is known to have lots of money

Wikimedia Foundation
Arbitration Committee
Bureaucrats
Administrators
Editors/Wikipedians

@ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Formal_organization
Article production and review

How are articles created?

- Anyone can contribute; Editor/Reviewer status depends on number of contributions
- Review for new articles by Article for creation reviewers meeting Wikipedia experience criteria
- Article changes reviewed by pending change reviewers with less strict eligibility criteria

How accurate is Wikipedia?

Insight from comparative studies


- 2018 comparative study of bias in articles on US politics: Wikipedia is slanted towards Democratic viewpoints and has more bias; bias decreases with number of edits/contributors

- 2015 Metastudy on 110 studies on Wikipedia reliability: mixed results, would be useful to know which Wikipedia parts are reliable

Number of English Wikipedia articles over time
Article production and information quality

Is Wikipedia a form of swarm intelligence?

• Wikipedia offers a collaborative platform where articles can be gradually improved and errors can be corrected collectively

• Idea: generate information based on swarm intelligence of many contributors

• Reality: much of Wikipedia content is produced by few users
  • Single user (Steven Pruitt) created more than 35000 articles
  • 49% of articles in Scots Wikipedia written by one user not able to speak the language

Symbolic picture: swarm intelligence (Source:www.geograph.org.uk)
Article production and information quality
Development of contributions over time

- Number of contributors steadily declining
- Very high usage, prominently indexed by all major web search engines
- Quasi-monopoly (no other site of comparable size and reach)

Number of active contributors in the 8 largest language editions
https://wikipedia20.pubpub.org/pub/lifecycles/release/2
Anonymity of Wikipedia Contributors

Advantages and disadvantages

• Advantage: possibility for repressed minorities to write without fear of consequences

• Disadvantage: no assessment of authors qualification, experience or bias
  • Example: Novelist Robert Clark Young sabotaged pages of other writers

• Disadvantage: manipulation for commercial or political special interest groups (e.g. paid editors)

• 2019 court decision on Wikipedia: editors are not entitled to anonymity

Symbolic picture: Anonymity
Vandalism and manipulation prevention

- Vandalism prevention:
  - Bots
  - Recent changes review
  - Watchlist of selected pages
  - Incidental discovery

- Despite these efforts, vandalized pages have remained online for considerable periods of time

- Less obviously wrong information is hard to detect (e.g. made up details in biographies)

Vandalism on Bill Gates Wikipedia page: https://images.complex.com/complex/image/upload/t_article_image/v0apo1ddvyeq8gg9yvjr.jpg
Wikipedia Criticism

WIKIPEDIOCRACY

Billionaire Aubrey McClendon’s Paid Wikipedia Articles

By Stanislav

Proposing new draft

I was working on the same page at the same time as my team. We were also working on the main page of our platform for the same period. I had to make sure that the draft I was creating was consistent with the content of our main page.

Somehow Wikipedia Never Learns

The Spookynmonkey Story

By John the Hammer

Way back in 2013, Wikipedia editors investigated the activities of a Wikipedia editor known as ‘Spookynmonkey’. He had a blog post that he used to mention other editors and attack them. This was a highly controversial issue that Wikipedia had to handle. However, the editors didn’t learn from the experience and repeated the same mistakes.

Wikidata: Melania Trump was a “former sex worker and porn star”

Guest post by Wikipedia editor From

Editor’s note: This submitted text was deleted by Wikipedia editors on June 22, 2009. In line with a statement that he subsequently received from the Wikipedia Foundation, we declined to publish this story. 

At this point, we can’t verify the validity of these claims. As we’re publishing these claims, it’s essential to remain neutral. Want to know the truth? Let us know the facts.

For some, Wikipedia is actually more fun than a branch of their own

http://wikipediocracy.com
Alternative Online Encyclopedias
Projects similar to wikipedia

Citizendium
https://en.citizendium.org
Founded by Larry Sanger as Wikipedia alternative; authors publish under their real name

http://de.pluspedia.org
German language only; in addition to new articles it contains articles/versions changed or deleted by Wikipedia

https://everipedia.org
Blockchain used for decentralization and editor contribution valuation; launched 2015 as Wikipedia fork
World view wikipedias

Online encyclopedias with world view agenda

- Several world-view centered Wikipedia-like projects exist
- Sites have been founded based on criticism of world views expressed in Wikipedia articles

www.conservapedia.com
American conservative and fundamental Christian encyclopedia

https://rationalwiki.org
Counterpoint to conservapedia fighting pseudo-science

www.newworldencyclopedia.org
Unification church project
Expert Encyclopedias
Commercial or state sponsored

www.britannica.com
Encyclopedia Britannica with author names and article history

infoplease
www.infoplease.com
Free information site by pearson.edu

www.wolframalpha.com
Search engine-like; provides historical information by date, unit conversions, stock data e.t.c.

www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca
General knowledge and Canadian topics
Can we trust Wikipedia?

- Wikipedia useful as a huge general knowledge database
- Currently there is no online-encyclopedia comparable in number of articles and popularity, so it has a quasi-monopoly

⚠ Information can be wrong, biased or incomplete. Important information should therefore always be double-checked

- For scientific purposes it can only be used as a starting point allowing to access primary sources get keywords for additional searches
Thanks for your attention

Questions?